

A movie poster featuring two young men. The man in the foreground has spiky blonde hair and green eyes, looking slightly to the right. The man in the background has brown hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera. The background is a dark space scene with a red planet on the left, a green planet at the bottom right, and a spaceship with red thrusters in the lower left. At the top, there is a grid-like structure.

AMY LANE

**A SOLID CORE
OF ALPHA**

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Dreamspinner Press

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A Solid Core of Alpha
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Acknowledgments

IT'S not easy living with a writer. We're flaky people. We forget about vet appointments or functions at our children's school or doctor's appointments or cleaning the kitchen—and we're *always* running late.

My family knows this, and they love me anyway, and they accept that I will always love them more than the people in my head, even if sometimes the people in my head shout louder than they do.

As always, this is for Mate and my children. I will *always* love you more than the people in my head. I promise.

“My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear, that wants hard use.”
—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 3.4. 141-142.

“Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil.
For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?”
—Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*.

“‘You’re still alive,’ she said.
Oh, and do I deserve to be?”
—Eddie Vedder, “Alive.”

“If I had the chance I’d ask the world to dance,
and I’ll be dancing by myself.”
—Billy Idol, “Dancing With Myself.”

“The world around me changes...
The streets are full of strangers.”
—Herbert Kretzmer, “On My Own,” *Les Misérables*.

Part 1: Anderson

Chapter 1 Darkness

THE meteor shower that destroyed the tiny mining colony that existed right outside of the Crab Nebula was so thorough that it left only one survivor, and for ten years, not a soul knew about him.

All Anderson Rawn knew was that about three minutes before the alarms sounded, indicating something large crashing through the atmospheric shields on their tiny planetoid, Anderson and his older sister Melody were exploring one of the many escape shuttles that the mining colony possessed. They watched in horror as the destruction began to rain down, and then Melody started shouting at Anderson, and Anderson, for once in his life, listened.

“I’m going to go get our family!” Melody said, her voice so certain that it left no room for doubt. “Stay here. I’ll be back, okay?”

“Mel, don’t leave me!”

“I’m going to get Jen and Mandy and Mom and Dad if I can! Stay here!” she shouted as debris crashed around their ears. Anderson, who was five years Mel’s junior, followed her directions because that was what Mom and Dad had taught him, and he was afraid, so that was what you did when you were afraid, right? You followed what your family taught you. You sat in the ship while your sister took off running, expecting your family to show up at any moment. You belted in when the vast shuttle, as big as a soccer field, remote started and fired up around you, and you hoped that Melody was putting the family in one of the other ships while your own ship began the pass down the runway that would take it up.

If you didn’t know how to set coordinates to the closest space station, you trusted that you’d be able to make it to the station the coordinates *were* set for.

Anderson had faith in his fellow colonists—they were hardy. Self-sufficient.

And completely unprepared for the car-sized shrapnel of meteor annihilation. The colony exploded into a vaporized wheel of mercury gas less than ten minutes after the alarms began to ring.

Anderson watched the explosion as the shuttle reached the smaller asteroids that surrounded the larger one that made up the mining colony. The ship was preprogrammed to avoid them, so he had nothing to distract him from the gigantic ball of black-orange destruction that signaled the end of his family, his friends, of every soul he'd ever talked to, ever seen, or who had ever known of his existence.

He sat there, his face pressed up against the tiny rear window of the shuttle, and searched the blackness around the ship for another, a sister ship, a friend, a fellow colonist, his mother, his father, his three sisters, the boy who used to help him remember to charge his electronic tablet for school... anybody. *Please, God? Anybody?*

Anybody?

The explosion of his world was still pouring into the vacuum of space to be extinguished when it disappeared from the tiny foot-thick window.

Anderson kept his face pressed up against it until his eyes were wept dry, until his screams faded in the compartment of a ship meant for thirty people, until he fell asleep and he slid, boneless and unconscious, into his seat.

He awoke when the ship's automated voice told him to make sure he was buckled in and to get ready for the jump to light speed. The automation was very thorough—it told him that there were fluids and vitamin supplements in the compartment in the seat in front of him. It told him that these were the only things he would be able to keep down for the first few days in hyperspace. It told him that there were barf bags in the same compartment, and that his headrest was set to play music or a book or a vid or whatever entertainment most suited his needs.

It told him that he would be in hyperspace for ten years, unless the current heading was changed within the next ten minutes.

Even if he had known how to reprogram the ship's course at that point, he wouldn't have had a clue where to go. He looked around the empty shuttle and at all of the empty seats. There was a small holodeck to his left, and the bulk of the mass of the shuttle was food, which could be accessed through ports underneath his feet. For a moment he struggled with the math. Enough food for thirty people for one year—that was the specification for the K-3-458, right? That meant that

one person would still have food after ten years.

He had food. He probably had clothing. He had entertainment.

He looked outside his window and realized he hadn't moved from his seat in sixteen hours, not even to go to the bathroom.

He really had to go to the bathroom. He would have a hard time walking for the next three to five days, as he accustomed himself to the hallucinogenic oddness of hyperspace. It would suck if he had to pee an hour after that started.

That was what he told himself repeatedly as he stood up and ran helter-skelter toward the multi-unit head, the kind with the tiny bathing recycler and enough hand sanitizer and soap and a small body drier so the thirty passengers with the small holodeck for exercise wouldn't all stink before their one year was up. So he peed like it was a holo-sport, and finished and cleaned up and ran back to his seat, buckled in, and plastered his face up against that window again.

What if he'd missed them? What if he'd missed them while he was taking a leak? Oh God. His mother, Caitlin; his sisters, Melody, Jennifer, little baby Mandy... how could Melody have just thrown him in this shuttle and sent him off to space? Wouldn't someone else have needed a ride? Why couldn't she have come with him?

It wasn't until the sudden magnetic space-warp of hyperdrive swamped the cabin of the shuttle that the truth—the entire truth—hit him.

Melody had gone to find their family on the off chance that they'd still been alive. But the destruction was so fast—she'd seen it. He'd seen it. They'd seen part of their planetoid cleaved off even as she threw him into the shuttle. She'd remote activated the shuttle for a reason. Probably because she had known she'd be dead before the shuttle had cleared the atmosphere. Their sisters, who had been waiting for the two of them to walk by and take them home, had probably died when the first of the projectiles had hit.

Melody had the heart of a steady soldier, and she would not have deserted her family. But she would have made sure one of them survived if she had the chance.

Oh, Melody, why didn't you come with me? We could have talked or fought or sang or quoted vids or played games or... or something.

He fell asleep in that first hallucinatory hour and dreamt that his sisters had all boarded the shuttle with him, and his mom and dad too. He woke up and wondered why little Mandy wasn't sitting on his lap, and where Mel's comforting arm had gone, and why Jen wasn't scolding him for drooling all over

himself. He squinted at the seats in front of him for Mom's golden braid with that smattering of grey and Dad's sandy-silver-brown head. They were always together when he saw them. Always.

But none of them were there.

Anderson blinked hard at the seats in front of him and then looked around the shuttle, at the closed door to the holodeck and the clear glass into the biosphere. Even the fact that they took up over half the shuttle space couldn't erase the total emptiness of the twenty-nine other seats/cots in the shuttle or the empty swiveling seats at the bridge console. From there, he looked outside of the shuttle, the billions of stars holding steady in the light-years' worth of distance, and felt the emptiness in his arms again.

He didn't cry this time. He screamed until his throat was raw, until he was too exhausted to move, and then he passed out.

When he woke up, he looked out at the banks of empty seats humming whitely in the beige space of the shuttle and wondered if he could hear the sound of his own heartbeat in the silence.

BY THE time the oddness of hyperspace began to feel normal, the initial shock of Anderson's grieving set itself aside and the normal inquisitiveness of a twelve-year-old boy asserted itself.

Anderson had never *been* on a shuttle before. He'd never left the surface of his tiny mining planetoid, actually.

He started with the biosphere and set the controls to start the cycle—to use the water reclamation to keep the food plants growing and to convert his waste into plant food. The biosphere served two purposes. It kept the air fresh without putting too much strain on the recycler, and even if the plants didn't thrive or Anderson didn't like the food, the organic matter could be easily converted in the food synthesizers into something tastier. Anderson's mining colony was small and self-contained, and Anderson had learned early on the importance and function of the biosphere.

After that, he focused on the entertainment package, and as he matured, this focus became the root of an ongoing project. He didn't consciously decide to become the cultural repository of the mining colony—it simply happened. He listened to the music (and the library was as huge as anything on one of the home planets—Regulus, Rigel, Earth), read all the books (often while listening

to the music), and watched all the vids. He raided the entertainment supplies and used the vids to teach himself how to knit, how to crochet, crochet Tunisian style, tat, embroider, and crewel. Before the journey ended, he knew every story ever penned by a member of his colony, every design ever stitched, every song ever sung, every picture every sketched.

But that was his spare time. Anderson had been an active boy—he'd had school, family duties, soccer, and jai alai. He could only listen to music or read books for so long without direction, and after a couple of days of watching comedy vids, he found his way to the holodeck.

At first, he only used the holodeck to exercise. The deck was programmed to call up humanoid forms made of air pressure and electrical currents to act as sparring buddies, spotters, and competitors. At first, Anderson simply looked past the energy-created drones and used them as their function indicated. Like most of the children at the mining colony, he was accustomed to using holograms in a purely utilitarian way.

It didn't take him long, though, to start talking to them.

That scared him at first, but what really frightened him was that one day, after a one-on-one squash game that he was quite proudly winning, he started making up a response back.

That evening, after sitting quietly through the course of school work that was in the computer system for his grade, he requested a book on elementary hologram programming and read it until the computer in his small corner of the shuttle pinged that it was rest time. Even after that, he pulled out a cover from the stockpiles of fabric and clothes stored within the seats themselves and a small rechargeable light and read the book after the lights aboard the shuttle had dimmed. He did not stop to think too hard about the fact that none of these precautions were necessary, because no adult would protest that he was staying up past his bedtime. Anderson liked routine—the computer said it was time to sleep, which meant that in order to stay up, he needed to quietly violate the rules. There was no *abandoning* the rules. It had to be a *violation*. And he had to have that clear to himself, as well as to the deadened hum of machinery that surrounded him.

The next day, he started programming elementary features on his hologram.

The day after that, he stayed up reading a book about sketching so he could sketch better features to use in the holo-program.

The day after that, he tried melding features from faces on the computer

logs with the hologram's, as well as his own rudimentary sketch work.

And so on.

By the time he'd been on the shuttle for a year, he had the holograms programmed to start talking back.

For a moment—a mere moment—he'd thought about making them look like his mom and his dad and his sisters, but he couldn't. He tried—he started with Mel and had programmed her long blonde braid and was working on her intense vulpine features when he left the holodeck to use the bathroom and came back and thought, for a moment, that it was really her.

He'd had to stop programming and had spent the next six hours watching his favorite comedy vids and trying to stop the tears.

He decided to program new people from scratch after that. Heaven knew he'd watched enough vids and read enough books, so he could imagine himself a peer group. He started with an older girl—like Mel, but different, with short-cropped dark hair and a permanent scowl. Mel had often been laughing, and this girl was decidedly not like Mel. He went on to a boy like Bren, the boy in his grade at school who used to bring him special wraps for his electronic stylus, the kind that made it look all holiday and pretty. He'd learned his lesson, though, and this boy looked nothing like Bren, who'd had vaguely colored sandy hair and light-gray eyes. This boy had dark sandy hair and dark brown eyes that were wide set and perfectly symmetrical, as opposed to Bren's, which had been charmingly uneven. Bren's left eye had also had a tendency to wander, and Anderson made sure that the hologram's eyes would stay front and center at all times.

At first, he was not satisfied with the results. There was something... artificial, something too perfect about their faces.

He spent a couple of days trying to give them random freckles or fractal-generated lines in their hands and at the corners of their eyes, but the more he tried to generate randomness, the more they looked like older people and not people his age.

He finally went with programming less in the way of appearance and more in the way of texture. He even experimented with scent and managed a vaguely human, organic burst of airflow to pass over their skin when they were on the holodeck with him. He realized after interacting with them for a day or two and discussing the modifications he was making that the less-is-more approach actually worked. One blink, and he was talking to a hologram. In another blink, he was talking to a friend.

He stopped there for a while. These two people, Kate and Bobby, made him happy. They played games and bickered over movies and discussed books. He gave their programs access to everything he himself had accessed and then gave them personal characteristics that were *not* his own.

He liked order, so he made Bobby a slob and Kate the sort of organic personality that could function in chaos.

He liked jai alai, so he programmed Bobby to like baseball so they could trade off teaching each other sports they didn't know. Kate preferred Frisbee golf and basketball and would often argue or mother Bobby and Anderson into playing the things she liked.

Of course Anderson could always backtalk to her or change her programming—but he didn't. He gave her characteristics that he thought would benefit him and contrast with his own. To change those tendencies when they didn't please him naturally seemed like cheating. He and Melody had argued all the time, but at the end of the day, she had kissed him on the forehead and said, "I love you, Squirt," and then, when his mom or dad came in, he wouldn't feel like ratting her out for the mean stuff she said sometimes.

He had to concede, there in the silent hum of an empty shuttle, that he said mean stuff too. Very often, he said it first.

So he programmed his friends to be different, in the same way his sisters had been different and his mother and father had been different from each other. And then he stuck to that—he would not change them, no matter how bad the argument, because that would be cheating.

Bobby and Kate ate breakfast with him and worked out and played Frisbee with him on the holodeck. It was Bobby who gave him the idea of expanding the holodeck, of cannibalizing parts of the seats—which all had the fiber optics and screen components—to make the deck longer, to make it wider, to make it more accommodating for a family of three. It was Kate who told him to take some of the seat covers and stitch them together into a large mattress and then use the seat parts to make a bed, so he might sleep there at night, and to program sleeping quarters for them so he could listen to other people breathing as he slept. It was his own idea to make sure the synthesizer was inside the holodeck—that way, he could stay in there and have his meals and generally create anything his little world needed to remain self-sustaining.

He hardly ever needed to go outside the holodeck to see the big blackness beyond his little shuttle, because after his first two years, the holodeck *was* the shuttle.

He incorporated the biosphere as part of a park program for him and his friends to play in, and programmed a house, with a sleeping room and a kitchen, and—this surprised him too!—a school.

Five out of seven mornings, Kate woke them up by coming into their bedroom and singing some random song she fancied, then throwing their clean coveralls at them and telling them that if they didn't wake up soon, she would program the food synthesizer for something really noxious, like sardines.

"You always threaten that," Bobby would groan. "Then we run in there, and it's fresh fruit and pancakes." Bobby liked pancakes. This was not a preference Anderson had given him, but he didn't mind, so that was fine.

The boys would dress rapidly, and then Kate would chivvy them about brushing their hair, washing their faces, brushing their teeth—big sister things, in general, before they started their day.

On their rest days, the three of them would sit down and hash out a plan—would they play Frisbee golf at the park? Would they swim in the surf? Ski down a mountain? Would they watch a vid and eat popcorn or go to an amusement park? Amusement parks had been foreign to Anderson until he'd opened the shuttle files and done his research. He found that he and Bobby liked them very much, although Kate often complained that they made her stomach hurt and her neck ache, so they didn't go every weekend.

Whatever they chose, Anderson would go to the console in front of the bridge and bring up the program they wanted. They spent their free time imagining things they wanted to do based on the archives of books and movies they accessed and created new environments, new diversions, or entire new worlds.

During the other five days of the week, they went to school. There were students there—faceless at first, like the workout drones that the holodeck was supposed to have, but Anderson and Bobby got creative, and watched more vids together, and read books, and soon, all of the material that he'd read and digested on his own in his first two years was being discussed by a teacher who looked a lot like the young action star in one of his favorite vids.

Kate didn't go to school with them. She attended a class with slightly older students, and every now and then, as Anderson and Bobby were chafing in the class that they'd created, they would see Kate, sitting under a tree and reading a book or riding a hoverboard over one of the meandering walks that made up the campus that she'd helped program, and they'd wave.

In the months approaching Anderson's sixteenth birthday—Bobby was a

few months older than he was, but not many—Bobby would frequently blush when they waved at Kate. Anderson had a hard time figuring out why.

Anderson didn't raise his hand often in school. He liked to watch the other kids do that, and watch the teacher, Mr. Kay, answer questions instead. Mr. Kay had dark hair and green eyes and grooves around his cheeks when he spoke. He was animated and had the sense of humor from Anderson's favorite comedy vid of all time, and he was kind—so kind, just like Anderson's father, but much younger, and very, very attractive—and he made all of that dry information that Anderson had read fun and relevant, and he was so very good at applying all of the technical sciences into ways a person could program a holodeck that nobody had ever thought of.

Anderson liked him immensely.

One day—because Anderson had programmed the holodeck to have the same twenty-four hour night and day cycle that had been present on the artificially spun colony—Anderson was staying late after class. Bobby had already left, since he and Kate were scheduled to fix dinner that night, even if Anderson was the only one eating real food, and Anderson was trying to access some files he'd discovered in the shuttle's education program that had been mysteriously locked.

“Whatcha up to, Anderson?” Mr. Kay smiled, and those grooves popped out on his cheeks, and Anderson blinked hard, like he'd programmed the park program with a sun that was too bright and it was bothering his eyes.

“Why are there locked files, Mr. Kay?” Anderson asked. They were alone. There weren't any other students there, not even the troublesome ones. Maybe Mr. Kay would trust him enough to tell him.

The teacher grinned a little and rolled his eyes. “Those are the health and hygiene files, Anderson. You'll gain access to those when you turn sixteen.”

Anderson gnawed on his lip. He'd been hoping for some sort of science file or star chart that might help him cut his stay in hyperspace a little shorter—but still. Health and hygiene? Why would that be age-classified information? “How will the shuttle know I'm sixteen?”

“It scanned your ID when you came aboard. If someone over sixteen wanted to access those files, then I could help instruct you on them, but otherwise....” Mr. Kay shrugged, and Anderson gnawed his lip.

“Can Kate access them?” he asked, still hoping that maybe the star data had been misfiled. He was absolutely mortified by the look Mr. Kay sent him.

“No, Anderson. And I can’t access them until you can. Do you need to make me say why?”

Anderson bit his lip and shook his head. No. No—it had been a while, months, probably, since one of his friends or Mr. Kay had needed to remind him that they weren’t real. He’d stopped thinking about them as programs or holograms. He’d simply begun living his life with certain proscribed rules in order to interact with the people he loved. It was like... like having to put on a wet suit if he ever wanted to be friends with someone from Hydra-Six. Just a requirement, that was all.

Mr. Kay had smiled kindly then and put his hand on Anderson’s shoulder and given it a squeeze. It was a simple interaction of electrical and air currents, that was all—it was how all touch on the holodeck worked.

It should not have caused such a startling physical reaction in Anderson, that was for darned sure.

His stomach tingled, and then his groin began to ache and swell, even as his face flushed. He kept his eyes and his unhappy smile on Mr. Kay’s face and tried very hard not to look to see if his penis was as tight against his shuttle-issue coveralls as it felt.

Mr. Kay wasn’t fooled for an instant. “Is anything wrong, Anderson? You look very uncomfortable.”

Anderson swallowed and shook his head. “No, sir. I think I should probably go out and exercise. My biorhythms are probably just out of whack because I’ve been working on this.”

Mr. Kay smiled kindly and squeezed his shoulder again—Anderson ignored the vicious throb in his penis when this happened—and told him to go play.

Anderson did.

The holodeck was planned to segue seamlessly—when Anderson walked out of the classroom, he walked onto the campus, which was designed much as the one on the colony had been. He had made plans, and there were probably unexplored nooks and crannies on the campus that he hadn’t seen yet, but he didn’t go to any of them. Instead, he walked across the campus to the dorm that he and Kate and Bobby occupied. There were probably rules about boys and girls in the same dorm, but by the time it had occurred to him that this living situation wouldn’t happen in real life, he’d already decided subconsciously that if it was his choice, it really was going to be *his* choice.

He was thinking of simply leaving his stylus and electronic school pad in his desk and dressing for a run, but when he went to take off his coveralls, there it was.

His penis.

It was large and engorged, thick and sensitive, and, well, Bobby and Kate weren't there, so why not?

Standing in front of his bed, he started to investigate it.

It was still semi-erect, and the head was starting to poke out of the little cowl formed by his foreskin. Gingerly, he pulled back his foreskin to find that the pink flesh underneath was especially tender, which he knew from cleaning it, but now in its erect state, the touch around that tenderness caused the engorgement to increase. He continued his two-finger exploration and found that the ridge of the large-sized, off-center, mushroom-shaped head was particularly sensitive when the foreskin was back. There was a place that felt like a stretched string on the underside, and when he tickled that, his entire body quivered, and he had to sit down. He put his thumb and fingers on either side of it then and began to play with the stiffness, stroking his foreskin up to cover the sensitive head and clenching tightly down because the counterpressure seemed to ease the ache at the bottom. That felt so good he shuddered, spread his thighs on his bed, and did it again.

This time he whimpered and then wrapped his fist around it and did it again.

He was surprised when a little bit of fluid spurted out the end, but it felt good when he used his thumb to play with the hot wet as it spread over the head of his penis. There was a building sensation then, down underneath his testicles, and they seemed to tighten, to draw up to the underside of his body. He brought his other hand down to cup them, to squeeze, and something amazing was happening, something truly fantastic that threatened to stop his heart and open his world, and he was reaching, and reaching, and reaching—

When Bobby, who was programmed, with Kate, to simply come and go randomly like real people opened the door to their bedroom and caught him.

Anderson's penis gave an abortive little twitch in his hand and then went limp as all of Anderson's blood rushed to his face.

He looked at Bobby, and for a moment, he knew his face held... longing.

He would have liked for Bobby to come help him with what he was doing. His testicles needed massaging, and his nipples tingled, and he couldn't touch all

these places at once, and... and it would just *feel* so much better if someone was there to help him.

But Bobby simply gaped at him, opening and closing his mouth and then, unbelievably, blushing. He cleared his throat then and said, "I can step out of the room until you finish...." And he left the sentence hanging.

Anderson yanked his shorts and coveralls up to his waist and shook his head. "I'm finished," he said gruffly, keeping his head turned away. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"No." Bobby's voice was thoughtful, which meant he was probably accessing the files on etiquette that Anderson had made available to the programs on the deck. Anderson had actually made *all* of the programs available on the deck. Whatever he knew, his holos knew, but they got to choose how to use it, according to their programming, *and* they could reliably remember it. "I mean," Bobby said slowly, "I am embarrassed, but mostly because...." Bobby stopped then and assessed Anderson thoroughly. "You would like me to participate. I don't think you programmed me that way."

Anderson stopped dressing and swallowed hard. "I *would* like you to participate," he said roughly.

"Would you like me to get Kate? She might find this in her programming."

Whatever had been left of Anderson's erection shriveled completely, leaving only a damp spot in his shorts.

"No," he said, so full of realization that he couldn't put a voice to it, even to Bobby, who had always accepted him perfectly as he was. "I don't think Kate... Kate doesn't... she's not the person I want to participate."

Bobby? Yes. He would have liked that. Bren? His heart gave a slow, agonizing thud. Yes. His charm with Bren had probably been leading up to a moment just like this.

There was no stigma attached to his choice, not on his mining colony. It was just... just that Bobby didn't want him. Not that way. And for a moment, he felt incredibly lonely.

But Bobby had been his friend for... well, he'd come online nearly two Earth years before, and as Anderson's friend, Bobby smiled encouragingly. "I'll talk to Kate. She'll have an idea of what to do."

Anderson knew he turned a dull red. "Do we have to talk to Kate? I don't think I want Kate to know what I was just doing." He couldn't help but think of Melody and how he would *not* have wanted his older sister to know about

anything that he was doing to his penis.

Bobby continued to look thoughtful. “Kate will probably react as I did,” he said reassuringly. “And she may have some ideas for your—” process, process “—dilemma. I really think sharing information would be a good idea, don’t you?”

Anderson gave a little groan and buried his face in his hands. “Yeah. Yeah, Bobby. That’s fine. Just don’t do it while I’m there, okay?”

Bobby smiled a little. “I think that could be arranged.”

Anderson had a sudden thought about Mr. Kay and the touch that had started this entire conversation. “And, could you, I don’t know. Maybe keep this secret from everybody else?”

Bobby simply nodded in complete acceptance, and Anderson had a moment to think that maybe privacy was not a concept that would be programmed into a holodeck program. It didn’t matter. Privacy had suddenly become important to *Anderson*, and Bobby and Kate took their cues from him.

It was a satisfactory arrangement, because Anderson didn’t hear another word about a friend to help him massage his penis for a couple of months. That didn’t mean that *he* didn’t continue to explore this new development, but he had asked his roommates, and they had all agreed to a newly instated house rule about knocking before entering the sleeping quarters.

The fact that his roommates were both programmed to forget or ignore this rule within a standard deviation of the number of times Anderson himself forgot or ignored this rule kept Anderson *very* conscientious about knocking. It didn’t matter that he was highly doubtful he would encounter either Bobby or Kate in such a compromising position. What mattered was that he now understood that privacy was a two-way street.

IN ALL likelihood, Anderson would have eventually discovered the ins and outs of the magic in his penis—he certainly explored it an awful lot in the privacy of his holodeck quarters. He learned that if he continued what he’d been doing—simply lying on his back and stroking it until the wonderful, terrible pressure built up in his testicles, his spine, and his clenching buttocks—he would experience the most wonderful explosion, a climax of sorts. It was messy and sweaty, and embarrassing afterward, even if he was alone, but very often, the quest for privacy, the mess and the sweat, and even the embarrassment, were all

worth it.

He still wished for more knowledge—and for help. For, as Bobby called it, “participation.”

He wasn’t stupid—he knew what “participation” meant. Melody had been thinking very seriously about taking a lover before... before. Anderson had liked the young man—liked him well enough to not dump worms on the two of them when he’d caught them kissing under a tree and he’d had a bucket of worms handy... well, because a twelve-year-old-boy never knew when a bucket of worms might come in handy when he knew his sister wanted privacy in the colony orchard.

(He still could not bring himself to think about what a wretched child he had been. The knowledge that he’d almost dumped those worms on Mel was not as painful as the thought of the things he’d *more* than almost done, like, say, left a couple of them in Jen’s bed and given Mandy one to eat. He *wasn’t* that kind of boy. He *wasn’t*. *He couldn’t be*. If he was that kind of boy, then his sisters might not have known... they may have thought that he was mean and evil and that he wanted to leave them behind. *Dammit, Melody! I could have come with you!*)

So he hadn’t dumped the worms, and Mikey had been allowed a kiss in the orchard, and Anderson remembered that he knew. He knew what a lover was. A lover was a kiss under a tree. A yearning. The way Melody’s cheeks had turned red when Mikey touched her hand, her arm, the side of her breast.

A lover was what he’d wanted from Bobby but what Bobby had not been programmed to do.

So eventually he may have figured out what he wanted from the holodeck that the holodeck didn’t know how to provide, but one morning, shortly after the privacy protocols had been instituted, Bobby and Kate woke him up excitedly, both of them talking so quickly they babbled over each other’s words.

“Anderson! You’ll never guess—”

“I was accessing the homework tablet—”

“Bobby suddenly saw all of this data!”

“And Kate took a look at it, and it’s those files—”

“The ones that Mr. Kay said were locked—”

“Today is your birthday, Anderson!” Suddenly Bobby stopped and looked embarrassed. “Happy Birthday, Anderson. We will, of course, have cake after dinner.”

Kate rolled her eyes and smacked Bobby on the back of the head.

“Actually, genius, *I’m* taking care of the dinner and the cake. Remember the last time you tried to program a food synthesizer? We ended up with hamburger that tasted like metal bolts but chewed like meat?”

Bobby turned a dull red. “That was years ago, Katy. I’ve grown up a little since then!”

“Taller,” Kate growled, because it was true.

Bobby shook his head and muttered, “More than taller,” to Anderson, and Anderson had to laugh, because it was true. Both of them had matured quite a bit in the last two and a half years, even though getting Kate to admit that was like getting her to program the food synthesizer for bug soufflé.

It didn’t matter. That bit of normalcy was enough to calm the little family down, and Anderson rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and pulled a T-shirt on over his head. He’d been sleeping in his underwear lately, a thing that neither of his two roommates had remarked upon and that he had done as a kid, living at home with his parents. There was no one there to offend by being out of dress, and he was between sizes in the regulation jumpsuits anyway. It was just as easy to wear the oversized ones, but he didn’t want to sleep in one!

“Thank you,” he said, still bemused. “Now tell me about the files. Will they help us find a closer outpost?”

Their faces fell. “No,” Kate said softly. “We’re sorry, Anderson. They’re not about how to change direction in hyperspace or where you would travel. They’re about human anatomy and reproduction.” She brightened again. “You would not *believe* what your body can do!”

Anderson thought he might have figured some of it out on his own, but as it turned out, he’d barely touched the tip of the cloth-covered penis.

Chapter 2

Introducing...

THEY did not engage the school program that day but instead gathered around Anderson's tablet and the various vid-screens and pored over the new information.

A lot of it was diagrammed, and Anderson did a lot of squinting at words like "glans" and "vesicles" and thought detachedly about what happened when he stroked himself in the privacy of his own room.

"Hey, Anderson," Bobby said excitedly, about the time Anderson had found the placement of the prostate and was tracing the gland on the screen with his fingers, wondering what practical purpose a bundle of erogenous nerves would have so deeply buried in the rectal orifice. It wasn't particularly easy for a man (because the nerves were only present in males) to access those nerves on his own.

"What did you find?" Anderson looked up, and what was playing on the personal vid screen Bobby held up made his mouth go dry.

"Oh," he said softly. "That's what sex looks like."

He'd known the basics. Even before the files were released, he'd understood that people took off their clothes and that girls had a vagina and a uterus meant for procreation.

Much like the prostate, he hadn't understood why the erogenous areas would be placed so deep in the body. He hadn't realized that males had a tab that was meant to fill every slot.

"Why is she putting her mouth on it?" Kate asked, and it wasn't Anderson's imagination. Her voice was breathy and soft when normally it was analytical and matter-of-fact.

Bobby tilted his head and looked speculatively at her. "I think... I think it would feel rather nice, don't you, Anderson?"

Anderson thought of Bobby's mouth on his penis, and his entire body flushed hot and cold, and, sure enough, his groin grew full and ached fiercely. "I

think it would feel *outstanding*,” he muttered hoarsely. “If you two could, uhm, excuse me for a moment?”

He’d read a list of words for what he was about to do—words he’d actually heard in the schoolyard but whose definitions he hadn’t known the specifics of.

Whacking off, beating off, spanking the monkey, varnishing the pole, smacking the salami, jerking the chain, yanking the snake, lubing the lizard, tickling the pickle, choking the chicken, etc., etc., etc.

Now that he’d spent a couple of months “waxing his rocket,” he knew how long it would take and how quickly he could clean up and be back with his friends, talking about this new and interesting influx of information.

He was in his bed, his cock (that was a new word, courtesy of the new information) in his fist, when Bobby and Kate violated their programming and did something that real friends might do instead.

Or maybe just *Anderson’s* friends.

They violated the rule of standard deviation and intruded. They were quiet—he was barely aware that they were there, watching, as his pre-come (another good word to have) spurted over his fist. This time, because they were stealthy, he ignored them, continued to stroke, continued to squeeze, became lost in the sensation, and, when the fabulous, amazing, tremendous pressure built up, allowed himself to groan out loud as he came. (And he *loved* what that word had come to mean. Came, came, came, coming, come! *Auuugghhhhhh... God... Come!*)

When he was done, he lay there, panting, before taking a cloth he’d been keeping by his sleep hammock and started to wipe himself off.

“How was that?” he asked hoarsely. “Like the videos?”

“Better than the videos,” Kate said, her voice throaty. He looked up, expecting to see her customary scowl, and saw that she was staring instead at his limp, shining cock. She met his eyes unhappily. “Bobby said you wouldn’t appreciate my help with that.” Kate looked away, which was unusual as well. She was the forthright member of their group—the moral center. Anderson had made her that way, and he appreciated that she was blunt and strong and open. “That’s too bad.”

Anderson looked at her and felt bad, and then looked at Bobby, whose gaze was fastened hungrily on Kate’s face.

“Bobby would probably like the help,” he offered, and Bobby turned red.

Kate turned to Bobby, her expression soft. She was older than the two of them, built tall and strong, with proud breasts and solid hips. If Anderson was going to room with a woman, he wanted her to look different from men and boys, and so she was.

She was three years older than Anderson and Bobby, but Anderson had grown in the past three years, and so had Bobby. They were taller than she was, although their wrists were still thin and their hands and feet seemed abnormally large. (According to the newly released files, that was not uncommon among adolescent males, a thing Anderson *really* wished he'd known before he'd started sprouting out of his coveralls like a bean plant.) She was also....

God. Was she as lonely as Anderson?

Anderson looked at his friends, who were staring at each other as though frozen, although Anderson could see a pulse throbbing in Bobby's neck and Kate occasionally licking her lips. He recalled a box he'd checked during their programming, a time he tried more and more not to think of. The box had been irritatingly vague.

The box had read "Proclivity."

At the time, Anderson assumed it had meant the things that were important to him at thirteen years old—sports, comedy vids, music, amusement parks (he and Bobby spent hours planning theirs), dogs (he and Bobby had been trying to program a dog for the holodeck since their very first sentient conversation), and playing games (they had graduated from games to three-dimensional multi-faceted jigsaw puzzles, and it was one of their favorite things to do when they were playing a vid or listening to music). He had tried to type in these proclivities in the box and had wondered why it seemed redundant along with "tastes," "hobbies," "interests," and "skills," but none of those things seemed to be what the computer had wanted. In the end, he had simply programmed "standard" and left it alone.

After this morning's reading and his conversation with Bobby months before, he thought that maybe "proclivity" meant this—this thing that had Kate and Bobby staring at each other with hunger in their eyes and skin as flushed as a red sun.

"Would you two like to...." He flushed, uncertain how to phrase this. "Would you two like me to leave the room, so you can...?"

"No," Bobby said breathlessly. "Don't leave the room."

Kate stepped into Bobby's space then and caught his chin between her

fingers. Bobby was taller than she was by three or four inches, and he looked down at her with an expression that was so crushingly vulnerable Anderson doubted he would ever have the courage to show it to another being.

Their lips touched, and Anderson gasped. His own skin flushed hot, and a chill took up residence in his groin. His cock began to swell again. Bobby's bunk was across the room from his own bed, and Bobby pressed Kate there, kissing, kissing, his hands rasping on her pale skin. Bobby had a tan on his neck and the backs of his hands—he and Anderson spent time outside and in the greenhouse—and Anderson watched, his breath frozen in his chest, as those dark hands cupped Kate's pale cheeks, her chin, her neck, then unzipped the front of her coveralls, baring her breasts to the air.

Anderson could see every detail—the way Kate's nipples puckered in the air, the way her vulva glistened when Bobby spread her thighs to explore. He watched Kate's expression as she bit into her palm to keep from making sounds of arousal and then saw how frantic she was as she scrabbled to bare Bobby's skin to the air so that she could touch him the way he was touching her.

Anderson watched as she opened her mouth and pulled Bobby's cock into it while Bobby was pleasuring her own erogenous zones, and he thought of someone—a male—performing the same act with him, with the same hot desperation, and without even quite realizing it, he shuddered, convulsed, and climaxed without even touching his own body.

And still he could not take his eyes off of the sight of two people making love.

Yes, he'd read those words too, and this was what Bobby and Kate were doing. As Bobby poised his cock at the entrance of Kate's body, and nuzzled her lips, asking her to open her mouth for him, open her thighs, allow him entrance, Anderson realized that it was these two words, "making love," that had prompted his friends to request his presence.

They wanted him to see what he should aspire to.

Kate gasped, a pleasure sound, and moaned Bobby's name as Bobby moved faster. Anderson's mind both recalled and ignored the dry medical words he'd read about friction stimulating nerve endings and where in Kate's body the most sensitive nerve endings were located, and what Bobby's uncircumcised penis was doing as it rubbed against her tender inner walls. He realized that what those words said and what they actually meant were as far apart as... as planets in a solar system to a vessel without a hyperdrive. The touch of two people, skin to skin, was electric—it was the hyperdrive that powered what he was seeing in

front of him.

Kate cried out, lifting her hips, wrapping her legs around Bobby's bare backside, and Bobby's expression became frightening. His eyes bulged, he grimaced—he looked frightened, angry, and ferocious, all at once, and Anderson wondered if *he* looked like that when *his* climax was upon him. At that moment, Kate let loose a sound. Anderson shuddered again, his spent member giving a pulse that indicated arousal. Even though she was a woman and her breasts and vulva did not attract him, the sound was... raw. It was passionate. It was *need* and *hunger* for the contact, for the convulsion of electricity and nerve explosions that was climax, and Anderson's body throbbed in sympathy for it.

He *needed* and *hungered* too.

Bobby gave a shout, and his buttocks clenched, and he shivered inside of Kate, and Kate moaned and gave a breathless little shriek before shuddering around him, and then the two of them grew still, after a few twitching pumps from Bobby's hips in aftershock, and their movement subsided. Bobby laughed a little and nuzzled Kate, and Kate smiled at him shyly, when Kate was never shy, and Anderson, lying sideways in his bed, simply watched them through half-closed eyes.

He was tired. His body had climaxed many times that morning, and his mind was overloaded with too many ideas to count and to catalogue. He watched as his two friends murmured, and touched, and whispered. He watched as Bobby rolled his spent body off of (and out of) Kate's and then went to get a cloth to wipe her down.

When Bobby was done, he pulled a blanket (he'd chosen a deep ochre for his bed, although it was not a favorite color of Anderson's) up around the two of them, and they snuggled down together on the narrow cot, facing Anderson.

"Do you know what you want now?" Bobby asked him when he'd checked to see that Kate was drowsing in his arms.

"Yes," Anderson said, his voice hoarse. He was unaware until that moment, but at some point, he must have shed tears.

"Do you want our help to do it?" Bobby offered, almost excitedly, and Anderson wiped his nose with the sleeve of his coveralls and smiled shakily.

"I don't think I can do it without you," he said, and this was the truth.

As it turned out, he didn't have to do it at all.

Chapter 3

Alex Leonard Peter Henry Aaron

BOBBY and Kate told him that they would brainstorm with him, but that they should do more research first. The research turned out to be... stimulating.

As it turned out, the health and hygiene files contained quite a few entertainment files as well—and not all of it was as explicit as what Bobby had discovered that first day.

“This is dumb,” Bobby snapped one day, pushing his chair back viciously so that the wheeled bottom went skidding all over the floor of the boys’ sleeping quarters.

“Aren’t you reading one of the novels in the H and H info dump?” Katy looked up from where she lay on her stomach, her chin in her hands and her knees crooked so that her heels dangled over her bottom. She was reading her own novel—she’d discovered quite a few of them that she enjoyed immensely, and she and Anderson had been comparing notes. Bobby tended to prefer the visual media, the romantic comedy vids (Anderson liked those too), and the sexually graphic “instructional” videos, although Kate often complained that the only thing *those* videos taught her was that she needed to take yoga if she and Bobby were going to do all the things those videos showed people doing.

“Yeah, it’s only the romance!” Bobby complained now. “It’s not the... you know... the....” He made a hip thrusting movement in his chair, and Kate eyed him narrowly.

“The sex?” she asked with an over-sweet tone, and Anderson looked at her curiously.

She and Bobby had been experiencing sex in all of its forms: Bobby would watch the video or read the explicit passage, and then he and Kate would try it out. Sometimes they would do it in the room, and Anderson would watch curiously, but more and more often, Anderson would wake up at night and hear them in Kate’s quarters, where they were considerably louder in the added privacy.

Bobby apparently did not recognize that her tone of voice was some sort of

danger signal, but she reminded Anderson of Mel the morning after she woke up to discover the big, experimental black stripe down the back of her honey-blonde braid.

“Well, *yeah*, the sex!” he said with a grin, and he was surprised (but Anderson was not!) when the pillow near Kate’s head was suddenly hurled at his face.

“I think you’re disgusting,” Kate snapped, leaping from the bed and stalking toward the door. “I think *you’re* disgusting, and if you think you’re the only boy in this program who’s remotely attractive to me, you’re severely deluded. Good luck having sex with yourself, asshole!”

The pneumatic door whooshed open and then shut behind her, leaving Bobby staring at her with his mouth open.

“Do you have any idea what in the fuck that was about?” The health and hygiene files had also given them access to some of the more exciting swear words. Anderson had heard these words in the schoolyard, of course, but they had been used by the older boys, and he hadn’t quite gotten the nerve to use them yet before... before. Now that he had friends who were actually old enough and physically capable enough to *fuck*, using these words felt like sort of a privilege.

“I think you’d better find out,” Anderson said carefully, because he *did* know what that was about, but he didn’t want to hurt his friend’s feelings. “Especially if Kate’s the only person here *you* want to have sex with.”

Bobby blinked at him. “Of course she is.” He blinked again. “God, Anderson, I can’t imagine having sex with anyone else. It’s like... for the last year, I looked at her and thought... thought she was *everything*. She made my stomach tingle, and... I couldn’t look at her without blushing. And that day....” He blushed now. “That day I caught you, you know”—he blushed harder—“*caught* you—man, it was like, that day, I finally knew what part of my body I wanted to engage, you know? Suddenly, I looked at her, and she wasn’t just another girl... she was *the* girl. She was... she was everything.”

“You said that already,” Anderson said, but his throat was dry and his eyes burned too. *Everything*.

Bobby stood up and started pacing. “Why doesn’t she know that?” he said unhappily. “And why did caring more about the sex than the other bullshit in those books make her so mad?”

Anderson started to laugh then, helplessly. “You moron!” he gasped, as

Bobby just stared at him in disgust, and it was a long time, and his stomach muscles hurt from giggling, before he calmed down enough.

“What in the hell is so funny?” Bobby fumed. “Seriously!”

Anderson stopped giggling and wiped his eyes. “You’re so stupid! Don’t you realize that all that romance stuff you hate so much is the same stuff you just told me about Kate being *everything*? That’s all she wants to hear, you know. God—go give her a present that has nothing to do with sex and tell her she’s everything! You two will be rolling around like... like....” His mind flailed for comparisons, and all he could call up were the science and nature vids that had also opened with the health and hygiene subsection. “Like humping Altarian lemming-birds.”

Bobby looked at him in horror. “Okay, okay, okay—I get it. Romance, it gets you sex!”

Anderson blinked and shrugged. “Yeah, okay. Fine. Romance gets you sex. Look at it that way.”

Bobby’s expression changed, grew crafty. “What are *you* reading?”

Anderson flushed. “Romance,” he said, hiding his face.

“With a boy and a girl?”

Anderson’s flush intensified. “Yeah, this one. They have some with girls and girls and some with boys and boys. I like those too.” That was an understatement. *Those* had been his favorites, but he liked the boy-girl ones too. The story seemed to be the thing that pulled him under, and family, the happy banter, the interest. But yes, he liked it when the story showed two men. He’d had no primer for this part of his life, none at all, until that health and hygiene file had opened.

Bobby looked at Anderson’s reading tablet speculatively. “Send that one to me, okay?”

Anderson shrugged. “Yeah, all right. Are you going to go make up with Kate yet?”

“Yeah. But, uh, send her the boy-boy romances you like, okay?”

Really? “Really?”

“Yeah. I think she’d get a kick out of ’em.” And with that, Bobby went trotting out of the sleeping quarters, propelled by nothing Anderson could think of.

Of course, a half an hour later, he heard the now-familiar noises from Kate’s quarters, including the new addition of Kate screaming, “Oh... Bobby...

yes!”

The sounds never failed to arouse Anderson, partly because he could hear Bobby making his own demands and partly because now, after a couple of months saturated in health and hygiene, he had a much deeper, much more vivid imagination with which to picture making sounds like that of his own. He switched the feed on his tablet to an explicit picture of two young men, naked, reversed against each other so that each one could swallow the other’s genitals in open, needing mouths.

He pressed play on the video with one hand and, with the other, unzipped his coveralls and began to slowly stroke his erection. Even as he threw back his head and enjoyed the pretty young men and enjoyed the sensation of his cock in his fist, he had to wonder, of course he had to wonder, if he was destined to do this alone.

Two weeks later, a new student enrolled in Mr. Kay’s class and was introduced as Alex. He had a square-chiseled chin, a chest far more developed than most sixteen or seventeen-year-old boys’, and piercing blue-black eyes. He swaggered into the class, surveyed the students with mild contempt in his lazy, hooded gaze, and smiled faintly when his eyes landed on Anderson.

“No worries, teach,” he said with a smirk. “I know where I’m sitting.”

Anderson looked to his right where a thin, fair-haired girl, who reminded him of his sister Jen just enough not to hurt, usually sat, and sure enough, it was vacant.

Anderson turned to his left and glared at Bobby with pure venom.

Bobby gave an unconvincing smile and said, “What?”

““No worries, teach’?” Anderson echoed. “Where did you get this guy?”

Bobby hushed him and looked at Alex from underneath lowered eyebrows. “He’s. Right. There.”

Anderson turned to his blind date and smiled thinly. “Hi, Alex. My name is Anderson. It’s nice to meet you.”

Alex smiled arrogantly and raised his eyebrows like a pro. “*Hello, beautiful!*”

Anderson looked at Bobby, who grimaced back. “Well, maybe Alex isn’t quite your type.”

“It’s like he was made for me,” Alex purred, and Anderson lowered his

forehead to his desk and started a rhythmic thumping designed to hustle them through the next four hours of school.

It didn't work. Alex was like... like a Hydran slime leech, only tighter to Anderson's skin and twice as gross. He fawned, he grabbed, and by the end of the school day, Mr. Kay had reprimanded him twice for imposing on Anderson's personal space, and moved his seat. The kicker was when Alex gave that heavy-lidded smirk of his and said, "No worries, teach. Tomorrow, I'm sure a new seat will be in the program." He winked at Anderson and said, "Get it, brown eyes, get it? Program?"

Anderson glowered at his best friend. "Oh, I get it," he muttered, and Bobby had the grace to blush, even if it was the thousandth time.

"So?" Kate asked eagerly as they met her after school. They walked through the carefully designed pathways, around buildings and secret corners, and right into—

"Oh. My. God."

And there was Alex, his impressively large, thick cock elongated and full in front of him and one of the weaker-willed, less attractive girls in their class on her knees before him.

Anderson simply gaped, but for Bobby, this seemed to be the last straw. After grabbing both Anderson and Kate by the arms and hauling them out of earshot of the smirking Alex, he turned to Kate in outrage, snapping, "Bi? Of all things, you made him *bi*?"

Kate shrugged and looked sheepish. "Well, Anderson clicked 'standard' on everybody's proclivities. I figured this way, if he didn't work, he could, you know, find someone else who liked him."

Anderson looked at her, feeling a little queasy. "He's, uh, sort of a sleazebag, Kate. Do we really want to, you know, squander our energy on a sleazebag?" The "squander the energy" thing wasn't simply metaphor. Anderson had been doing fuel calculations over the past few months, trying to see if the extra use of power that had converted the entire shuttle to a holodeck was fully compensated for by the lack of the thirty people that the shuttle would normally have been carrying. Since it was only designed to be in space for a year, the whole prospect was an iffy business, and after having Bobby and Kate and Mr. Kay double-check his calculations, Anderson had been forced to make some modifications. Kate would have graduated two years before anyway, so now, when she would have normally been in school, her program was diverted to the shuttle's autopilot. This did two things—it meant that her school program didn't

have to be run, and, honestly, it made Anderson feel a little better knowing Kate was steering the shuttle.

They'd begun to eliminate other things too—trips to the amusement park had become fewer and further between. Mr. Kay became Anderson and Bobby's *only* teacher, and their class had stabilized to the twenty people they really liked and with whom they worked well together. And the curriculum was leaning more and more to things that might possibly get them out of hyperspace and to a closer space station than the one the shuttle had been programmed for. So the question was real. Could they really afford to squander fuel on a sleazebag?

They talked about it—Anderson hated “cheating,” as he called it, but after three days of getting his ass grabbed on a constant basis and wondering who was going down on Alex for the other eight hours of the day, he was pretty sure they were nowhere near closer to coming to a resolution.

Until the next day when Alex was gone, and a shy boy named Len was introduced. Len had dark hair and blue eyes, like Alex, but his blue eyes were a lighter, brighter, happier color of sky-blue. He also had a stammer and a terminal blush.

He came to sit down next to Anderson, and Anderson smiled encouragingly. Len excused himself abruptly to run to the bathroom and be sick from, as he explained through his stammer a few moments later, sheer nerves.

Anderson made a good-faith effort with Len, but after four days without even getting a complete sentence from the poor boy, even the eternally optimistic Bobby had to admit it was a wash.

“I'd sort of feel bad about pulling the plug on the guy,” Bobby said that night, “but really, he seemed so bloody miserable the entire time, it was sort of merciful really.”

Anderson scowled at him. He didn't like “pulling the plug” on *anybody*. It felt like cheating, that he and Bobby and Kate could essentially play God with the people who came and went on the holodeck.

But then, he didn't want to be permanently alone either, so the scowl was as harsh as his expression got, and the next day, Peter was introduced to the class.

Peter had plain brown hair and plain brown eyes, a pair of spectacles that he liked to push up, and a studious, earnest expression that appealed to Anderson immensely. Peter lasted a little longer than the first two boys. He was invited to dinner with Anderson's family and allowed to watch vids with them as well. But by the fifth date, when Peter excused himself early to go home to do homework,

and he hadn't cracked a smile, even once, not even at some of Bobby's more inspired clowning, Kate had shaken her head.

"No, Anderson, I'm thinking this one is a wash."

"What's wrong with him?" Bobby looked hurt. Peter must have been a whole lot of his idea. "He's quiet, he's serious, and he's a lot like Anderson!"

"Well yeah!" Anderson burst out, throwing some popcorn at him. "Except I like to think I'm not a complete tool!"

"Not *all* the time," Bobby conceded with a badly concealed smirk, and this time it was Kate who threw popcorn at Bobby.

"Yeah, Bobby," she chortled, "only when you're *not*!"

Bobby responded by throwing popcorn back at the two of them, and when they were done, very little of the popcorn had been eaten, they spent an hour cleaning the front living space of their dorm, and the three of them had laughed until their stomach muscles hurt. (Bobby whined about it most of the next day, and Anderson figured Kate was just a lot more stoic.) It was a good time, with the three of them, and they left it that way for a month or two.

ANDERSON'S loneliness grew more and more apparent, though, and Bobby and Kate became less and less eager to share their own intimacy with him. He began to spend more time studying the explicit sex vids on his own, and his own body with them. He was on the verge of asking the synthesizer if it could possibly program some sort of sexually stimulating anal probe when Henry was introduced in class.

He was so grateful for some hope that he couldn't even glare at Bobby this time.

Henry was great. He had a wonderful sense of humor, and he and Bobby could tell bad jokes and make fun of vids for hours. He was a little dryer than Bobby, though, and a lot less expressive. He was dry and sarcastic and analytical, and interesting.

Kate liked him—just not for Anderson.

Anderson might have been inclined to ignore her, but he realized that after their sixth or seventh date that he had no desire to hold Henry's hand, or kiss him, or even share a moment of breathless anticipation with him.

Henry was a friend, and nothing more.

Anderson walked him to his dorm that night (all of the students lived in the same complex—one of the driest bits of programming Anderson had done) and told him that they'd see him in the morning, and Henry—who had dark hair, glasses, dark brown eyes, and a dimple in his cheek, gave him a crooked smile.

“Really?” he asked softly. “The other kids talk, you know.”

Anderson blushed. He didn't know. He thought of the first three boys who had simply not shown up the next day and felt bad. “You'll be there,” he said softly. “You're a friend. And you help. We... we don't have a lot of fuel, and we can't use it on people who don't make things run better, but you're fine.”

Henry nodded and, unexpectedly, kissed Anderson's cheek. “You're a good person, Anderson. I wish you and I could have been something.”

Anderson shrugged. “So do I. See you tomorrow night for vids?”

Henry grinned, surprised and, hopefully, pleased. “Absolutely. Can I bring someone?”

Anderson was a little startled. “Sure. Who is she?”

“How did you know it was a she?” Henry was impressed, and Anderson smiled a little sadly, not wanting to explain.

Risa was the timid little blonde girl who kept moving to make room for Kate and Bobby's next attempt at matchmaking. She said very little most times, but when she did say something, it was usually memorable and unintentionally outrageous. Henry and Risa made a nice addition to their little group, though, and for a while, Kate and Bobby gave it up, allowed the new people to help make up the blank in Anderson's life, and stopped pestering him with potential bedmates.

In the meantime, Anderson started having *really* explicit, *highly* satisfying dreams about Mr. Kay. *Well, why not?* he figured with some resignation. He was seventeen now, and Mr. Kay was in his late twenties. The age gap wasn't unheard of, and, well, it was a small community, right? Dreaming about the guy wasn't such a bad thing, right?

That was what he thought, at least, until he accidentally confessed his new crush to his best friend.

“Mr. Kay?” Bobby said, not incredulously, not laughing, like Bobby usually was, simply puzzled. “Really? Hmmm... Mr. Kay. Interesting.” It was the speculative tone in Bobby's voice that made Anderson's warning alarms sound.

“Hey, Bobby, man, don't read anything into this, okay? I'm just... you

know. Telling you to tell someone, all right?”

Bobby smiled at him, brown eyes twinkling. “I get it, Anderson. No worries. You know me, just always looking for the joke, right?”

Except Bobby wasn’t laughing, and a week later, neither was Anderson.

THE air turned electric when he walked into the room. He was good-looking—sandy-blond hair, electric-blue eyes, high cheekbones, a narrow face, and a surprisingly firm jaw—but it was more than that. He didn’t have Alex’s arrogance and swagger, but he didn’t have Len’s terminal shyness by a long shot. He was quite simply In Command. He was a couple of years older than Bobby and Anderson, maybe twenty, maybe twenty-one, but he walked as though he’d commanded starships, planets, solar systems. He didn’t need to swagger, but any shyness he’d possessed had been burned out of him by his experiences as well. His body was long and thin, with slightly wider shoulders and big, capable hands. His blue eyes smoldered, and although his gaze didn’t dismiss Anderson completely, it didn’t linger on him either.

Mr. Kay introduced him as the new teacher’s assistant, and he stood in front of the class and inclined his head modestly.

“Good morning,” he said crisply, with a faint smile. “My given name is Aaron, but you all may call me Alpha.” Alex Leonard Peter Henry *Aaron. Nice.*

There were no titters, no laughs, and not a soul looked back at Anderson, even though everyone knew what this man was here for. Henry shifted a little to his right and said, “Jesus, Anderson, no wonder you made Bobby try again.”

Anderson couldn’t even smile, couldn’t crack a joke, couldn’t hardly breathe.

Alpha was no laughing matter.

Chapter 4

Oxygen Warning

Six Years Later

ANDERSON'S head hurt, and he moaned a little as he rolled out of bed.

They'd done it again.

Alpha's warm body moved next to him, and one leanly muscled arm barely missed throwing itself around Anderson's middle. Anderson dodged the arm but didn't dodge the bony hand as it clasped tightly around his wrist.

"You're going to be okay, you know that, right?"

Anderson looked away from those intense blue eyes and barely restrained himself from rubbing the bruises on his throat. "Yeah," he whispered, his voice hoarse from the night before, from shame, from fear. "I know."

"Anderson," Alpha said warningly, "you know you made me do that."

Anderson nodded, not really in agreement but more in self-defense. If he nodded, Alpha would let him out of the room, and he could go check on the warning alarm that was echoing through the ship.

"Let me come with you," Alpha demanded, and Anderson shook his head.

"No. Kate and Bobby are better at navigation and steering. You need to stay here."

Anderson zipped up his coveralls—one of the last few pairs that hadn't been cannibalized for fiber or used for substance for the synthesizer—and hurried out of his room, wondering if Alpha would put to rights the knocked-over lamps and furniture or if all of it would be in a pile in the center of the room when he got back. He didn't know, sometimes, which tack Alpha would take in his increasingly desperate attempts to manipulate Anderson's behavior.

God, his body ached. It felt as though all of him had taken a beating, and not just his throat and his rectum. He made his way through the house and opened the front door to the bridge console, a few feet away. He could hardly

look Kate and Bobby in the eyes as he took his place up in the front of the shuttle.

“Oh God,” Kate hissed as he sat down, and he looked away.

“Kate, I don’t want to talk about it,” he murmured, checking readings. Hyperspace had ended the year before, leaving them with coordinates to an occupied space station and a whole lot of space debris to pilot through. Kate had been studying her piloting and navigation while Anderson and Bobby had still been in school, a program they’d had to cancel not long after Alpha had joined them. That had been a good time, actually—they’d been optimistic that they could find a closer space station and pilot their way to it. When Anderson realized that they’d taxed their fuel reserves too much to bring the ship out of hyperspace, change directions, and then make the jump again, the good time had ended.

They’d progressed on their original heading, the one programmed into the ship by people long dead, and continued the awful balancing act of life versus bare survival—a balancing act that had lasted nearly five years. When they’d gotten the warning that hyperspace only had a few months to go, Kate had given Bobby and Anderson a crash course in steering and navigation, and they’d been learning by doing ever since.

It had been easier in that first year, before they’d been forced to cancel programs and make hard decisions. In the first year, it had been like a real relationship—Alpha hadn’t been as controlling, and Anderson’s free time had still been his own.

Now, things were not so easy.

Bobby tugged at the neck of Anderson’s regulation orange and gray jumpsuit, and it ripped a little, even as Anderson recoiled with a shouted, “Hey! Give me some space here!”

“Space?” Bobby snapped. “Space? That’s all Alpha’s been making us give you. How long since we had a movie night, Anderson? Read a book, threw a disc, went to the park together?”

“The school program,” Anderson mumbled. “We canceled it, and he felt... you know... superfluous.” That had actually been a long time ago—and it hadn’t been Alpha’s trigger by a long shot—but it was easier to say.

“*Look at yourself!*” Bobby shouted, and Anderson cringed.

“Shhh... Bobby! If you’re not careful, he’ll come up front!” Mostly, Alpha was kept in the house or in the backyard by Anderson’s directive—it was the one

thing he had stood absolutely firm on, and the other holograms had backed him up. But there was nothing physical keeping Alpha from interfering with engineering or programming, and Anderson wondered daily if he should change that.

Bobby shook his head, carefully tracing the bruises at Anderson's throat. Six years ago, the touch would have made Anderson blush. Now, it just made him want to cry. Anderson captured Bobby's fingers against his skin and said, "It's okay, Bobby. I'm fine. I'm going to be fine. He knows my limits, right?"

"God, I hope so," Bobby snapped, yanking his hand away to dash at his eyes. "Dammit, Anderson, if he kills you, he kills us all, you realize that, don't you?"

Anderson nodded and swallowed. "I get it. He gets it. He wants to live as much as you do." He wasn't sure if it was true or not. He thought it might just be a hope living in his own mind.

Suddenly Kate surprised him by going over his back for a hug. "What about you, Anderson?" she asked, rubbing her cheek against his. They'd experimented some more with scent on the holodeck a few years back, right after Alpha had been introduced, in those heady first few months when Anderson had been trying to make an impression. He hadn't been able to make anything that smelled real for Alpha and had given up. Kate had kept up with those experiments, and she smelled like something yummy—jasmine and vanilla, maybe—and she was suddenly inexpressibly dear.

"I want to live too," he said softly, and her cheek rubbed against his.

"We want you to want to," she told him, and he nodded and tried hard not to bawl like a baby, there on the bridge of the shuttle, as they tried to figure out how to keep the shuttle from going up against some minor planetoid and completely bursting into powder.

"Wait," Anderson said suddenly, something catching his eye. "Wait. Oh shit. Bobby, is that what I think it is?"

Bobby turned his fulminating gaze from the bruises on Anderson's throat and the one on his cheek—Alpha did like to slap—and actually looked at the readouts on the screen.

"Oh God," Bobby said, and for a moment, Anderson's shitty relationship was completely forgotten, and it was all about the beeping on the screen.

"Hermes-Eight. Christ. That's the star system with the station. It's got three occupied planets and a goddamned space station! We can dock there. Oh... oh,

God. How long?"

Anderson's heart was beating faster, and his mouth was dry. People. Other (not real, other) people. For a moment, just a moment, he felt the excitement of a little kid. For a fraction of a second, he remembered what it was like, hand in hand with Melody, pushing the baby in her stroller and talking to Jen as Mom and Dad took them for ice cream.

His hand rose to the swollen bruises on his throat, and that moment died, just like they had, and he was suddenly very much afraid. "Should we go?" he asked, wanting Alpha there to ask. *Alpha's not here. You've managed to keep him off the bridge. That's probably a good idea.*

Bobby gave an exasperated snort. "Are you *insane*? Of *course* we should go!"

Anderson swallowed and looked at him, trying to find words. "But... Bobby. You and Kate... do you think they would understand? They... they might try to...." He couldn't say the word, and Bobby frowned.

In the past six years, Bobby's chest and face had filled out, but he'd remained fit and wiry. In spite of the deterioration of things with Alpha, in spite of the strain Alpha kept putting on Anderson's relationship with... with *anybody* else on the shuttle, Bobby's primary emotional reaction was joy, and Anderson loved him for that. It showed in the way his eyes crinkled and his soft, full lips quirked up. It showed in the looks he sent to Kate on an almost minute-by-minute basis. A frown was still an unlikely expression on Bobby's smiling face.

"Might try to delete our programs?" Kate asked bluntly. She'd moved and was sitting in her console chair, the one in the center. Her no-nonsense scowl was aimed out of the shuttle, and she deftly steered them around some space debris that might have hurt, bouncing off their hull shields. Many holodeck programs had been sacrificed to maintain those shields after they came out of hyperspace.

"Yeah," Anderson whispered, looking at her apologetically. "They can't. You guys... you're my family."

Kate's primary expression was the scowl, and now she leveled it at Anderson. "You've got two choices, baby. You can dock at that space station in..."—she looked at her console and did some mental calculations—"seventy-two hours and give fighting for us a shot, or you can stay in this shuttle until all life support systems deteriorate in forty-three Earth days and we all go under."

There was a terrible pressure on Anderson's chest, the kind he felt when

Alpha wrapped those strong, brutal hands around his throat while buried deep inside his body. He struggled for breath, and the now-familiar sensation of oxygen deprivation brought black spots in front of his eyes. A decision. The horrible kind. Who should stay and who should go? Which holograms would stay in the program, which ones would be canceled? Which songs could they keep in data banks to represent the mining colony; which ones would they have to hold up in painfully transcribed form on a tablet and let the holodeck recorders imprint? Which photos should he keep, as the data banks filled slowly with his day-to-day life aboard the shuttle? Which ones would he have to eliminate? Which days of his and Kate's and Bobby's life should he get rid of (if they could!) so he could keep the memories of people long dead?

His vision got darker and darker, and he was aware that the sounds he was making weren't entirely sane.

It was Bobby who snapped him out of it. "Anderson... *Anderson!* Breathe, dammit, just fucking *breathe!*" He punctuated the scream with two fists in the front of Anderson's jumpsuit and a hearty shake. Anderson found himself breathing by reflex, by necessity, by the goddamned will to survive.

Yes. He still had that. The will to survive.

He *must* still have that. It was why Alpha stopped every night, just when he lost consciousness. It was why Kate and Bobby were still there, in spite of Alpha's insistence that Anderson cancel their programs, and why Henry and Risa were there, too, running the synthesizers, and maintaining the data banks, and rotating on pilot duty.

"I want you to live," he said now, his chest moving, his breath evening out. "I want you to live. *I want to live.*"

Kate was on the subspace frequency before the words were out of his mouth. He looked at her in surprise, and she glared at him. "Do you think I'm going to give you time to take it back?" she asked, and to his mortification, she was a little bit tearful.

"I wasn't going to," he said quietly. "We'll live, okay, Kate? I swear."

Kate wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Anderson, it wasn't supposed to be like this," she said softly, then, into the subspace radio, "Attention space station Hermes-Eight, this is space shuttle Cancer-Prime K-3-458, requesting permission to enter your space and dock. Please reply."

Anderson listened to her, grateful, as ever, for her practicality and acceptance, no matter what the circumstances. It *wasn't* supposed to be like this.

She was right. If things had gone the way they were supposed to, he would have blown up with the rest of his colony, and this ship and its crew would never have existed at all.

SOON enough the debris was gone, and Kate left the bridge to Henry and Risa, which always felt better than leaving it on auto-pilot these days. They were both given the firm instructions to call Kate, Bobby, or Anderson to the bridge in case anyone replied to their message, and Henry's excited cackle at the news made Anderson feel better still. Risa actually beamed, clinging to Henry's hand in tense excitement. Anderson bussed her cheek, ruffled Henry's hair, and joined Kate and Bobby in their favorite scenario these days for small celebrations—the Frisbee golf throwing park for a quick game.

Bobby was right: it *had* been a while since Anderson had been there. He felt the strain in his back from throwing and in his legs from walking before they were even halfway through the course. The simulated sun made his cheeks feel pink and raw, and they had even engaged the wind program, now that they knew it wasn't just pulling fuel they didn't have, and even that made his skin feel tender and fragile.

But he kept at it. For once, he didn't run back to his quarters early under the guise of "Alpha needs me." For once, Bobby and Kate didn't mention Alpha's name with venom and self-loathing for even introducing him. This time, in celebration, it was as though Alpha didn't exist, and they were free and happy and engaged in the joy of some physical activity, which they hadn't done in too long a time.

It had to end, though, and unlike their journey, it wasn't a happy ending.

They walked the program distance on very carefully maintained belts beneath the holograms that Anderson thought of rarely, if ever, and Bobby slung a casual arm around Anderson's shoulders. Anderson could smell the wind on him, and the sweat, and the soup he had spilled on his coveralls during lunch, and see the crinkles around his eyes that indicated he was in his twenties now and not his teens. In spite of their experiments with scent, he had long since stopped asking himself which of these things were real and which things were in his imagination, filling in the gaps. It didn't matter anymore. His mind had sanded away the edges of real and pretend, blurred them gently, letting him focus on what mattered.

What mattered was that he could feel the squeeze around his shoulders when Bobby said, “You can bunk with me and Kate for the next few days, you know that, right?” and the tense hope with which Bobby held himself, waiting for an answer.

“Yeah, Bobby,” he said softly, treasuring a friend’s touch on his shoulders. “I know. But I owe it to him, you know?”

“You don’t owe him anything!” Bobby hissed, and Anderson leaned his head on his friend’s shoulder.

“He kept us alive,” he apologized, and Bobby shook his head.

“*You* kept us alive,” he said with feeling, and Anderson sighed and accepted his words quietly. It was true. Bobby was right. But so was Anderson.

Like with everything in this world that Anderson had created, there was truth and there was truth, and one truth couldn’t be spoken and the other truth had to be felt, and everything in between was despair, grief, and violence.

And that, Anderson thought now, as Bobby and Kate clung to him and whispered words of love and healing, was what had happened to him and Alpha. It was the reason why, when they arrived at the dorms under a passable facsimile of a fading twilight, he disentangled himself from happy Bobby and maternal Kate and strode to his own quarters, well aware that this night could be the night on which Alpha snapped, forgot what was real, and finally killed the man he claimed to love.

THINGS had been good when Aaron “Alpha” first showed up in Mr. Kay’s classroom. Bobby and Kate had both done their “research” into the romance novels and the vids and all of the wonders opened up by the health and hygiene files that had so intrigued and titillated them in those first giddy days after Anderson’s sixteenth birthday.

Aaron seemed to have studied the playbook, and Anderson, so very, very lonely by that time, was happy enough to run the game to the exact mark on the field.

Alpha had started out simply talking, both to Anderson and Bobby. He’d cracked jokes, praised their work (which didn’t do anything for either of them initially, since they sort of felt like they were cheating—after all, they’d accessed all the material that went into the curriculum anyway), and sat down and ate

lunch with them.

His first pass had been a touch on the back of Anderson's hand, a very deliberate brush with his thumb. Anderson had walked home with Bobby that day practically ebullient, translucent with anticipation, with arousal.

Their first kiss had been at sunset, and Alpha had touched his face, softly, and then framed it in his long, confident hands before pulling him in and ever so gently brushing their lips together. Anderson had opened his mouth, allowed Alpha in, and the kiss had gone on until the last light of the sun had turned to darkness.

Making love had been tender, exploratory, filled with laughter and excitement. Alpha's skin was flawless, and his high-cheekboned, patrician features were intense when he touched Anderson with his smooth, dry hands. There had been a moment, more than one, actually, when Anderson had thought, *His skin is too perfect. His kisses are just right. He's exactly what I want. He's not real.* He'd kept those thoughts very carefully hidden, deep in the center, surrounded by his flesh, and continued the dance of seduction and surrender until the end.

And in the end, he'd been so grateful, so goddamned grateful, that it had been another touch to bring him to completion, and not his own hand, that he had been content.

That contentment had lasted for a year, maybe more.

In that year, though, a number of developments came to light.

The first was the fuel consumption. They were consuming too much. It should have been a simple matter of physics—Anderson's lone body instead of the thirty bodies that were expected to be there. But Anderson had amplified the power use of nearly every fiber optic and electronic device on the ship when he'd converted the entire shuttle into a flying holodeck. If the ship was going to stay in space long enough to get them all to another space station, they needed to cut power to programs they didn't need.

That was the year that Bobby, Anderson, Henry, and Risa graduated from school, and that Alpha lost his job as a teacher's aide.

Anderson and Alpha had been lovers by then, and Alpha had been the one who'd insisted that the school program took too much fuel. Anderson had retorted that if they were going to close down the school, they would have to cancel the programs for Mr. Kay and the other students who had kept Anderson and Bobby company for nearly four years, in effect, killing people he had

created.

Alpha had insisted, without mercy and without remorse.

Anderson had refused at the beginning, and the argument had escalated.

“I can’t! Don’t you see, Aaron, they’re my friends!”

“They’re programs! We’re talking about our survival here, Anderson!”

“They’re more than programs! Dammit, don’t you understand? They think and feel and talk. They’re more than just data I put into the ship by now. They’re real!”

Aaron’s crack across Anderson’s cheek slammed Anderson against the wall of his quarters, and he was still seeing spots when Aaron held Anderson’s face roughly in his hands. “Did that feel real?” he growled, and Anderson was so shocked that all he could do was nod and feel helpless.

“Then I’m the one you have to worry about. Now you cancel the programs you need to cancel in order to get this piece of crap to safety, do you hear?”

Anderson didn’t mention the first bruise, and after a moment of supreme unhappiness, neither did Kate or Bobby. They’d been trying to get him to cancel the school program for a week, and they were just so grateful to hear his final decision that they’d been eager to work on it with a clear heart. The work had taken all six of them—Henry, Risa, Bobby, Kate, Anderson, and Alpha, over a month, because they’d been cataloguing and documenting all of the collected data and personal archives, and that was when the second development had been discovered.

All of the holodeck interactions had been recorded, and there was no way to eliminate this function. It would, quite simply, render the entire holodeck inoperative. The problem was that the shuttle only had so much computer memory, and the holodeck archives would consume most of the computer memory, including the entertainment and personnel archives, long before the fuel ran out.

Those archives were the story of Anderson’s mining colony. Of his family. Of the books, songs, poetry, hell, even the vids—drama, comedy, musical, romance—and, ohmigod, the all-important health and hygiene files, *all of it*, the collective history, intelligence, and personality of the place Anderson had come from.

And he was going to have to just flush it away in order to keep the holodeck running?

Bobby was the one who had come up with a solution, a way of keeping those things by exposing them to the holodeck archives themselves. A picture in the holodeck used up so much less space than the RAM in the ship's archives, and playing the songs and all of the videos while they were sleeping didn't impinge on anyone's consciousness at all.

At first, Kate had worried about the noise keeping them up, and that was when Alpha had discovered the thing that caused the second fight.

"We're all programmed to sleep through the night?"

Anderson had been surprised. "Yeah, I'd almost forgotten about that." Things between them had mended in the past month, as they'd spent their energies fixing one problem and their creativity fixing another. Alpha was always happier when he had something to do, something purposeful. When he was happier, he was the young man from Anderson's dreams again, and things were peaceful in their small community. (Even their home had been made smaller by the elimination of the school. Their entire house, which had been a good-sized dorm complex, now consisted of three bedrooms and a common room, and Alpha had been subtly campaigning to put the other two couples into one room. Anderson had coldly vetoed that one. He didn't want his privacy violated any more than he imagined anyone else did, but that didn't stop Alpha from keeping up the argument.)

"Forgotten it? Why did you do it?"

Anderson flushed then. This was a secret thing. This was a thing he'd told no one, not even Bobby. Especially not Alpha.

"I was afraid the random behavior algorithms would disrupt my own sleep patterns," he said calmly. He was called upon to prevaricate so very rarely that he wasn't sure if he could do it right. Alpha seemed to be mollified, though, so he let the matter drop. Anderson walked out of their room then, and into Bobby's, and simply put his finger over his lips for a moment while he leaned against Bobby's wall and trembled. That had been a near thing. A terrible thing.

Bobby looked at him hard for a moment, but Anderson shook his head. Neither of them mentioned the moment again, and Alpha never asked, especially when the math revealed that a significant amount of energy was saved by keeping everybody asleep unless they were needed at the bridge.

Neither Anderson nor Bobby mentioned the fact that Anderson was now afraid of his lover to the point that he'd rather run away than risk Alpha's anger.

Neither of them mentioned the fact that they were both sure the disagreement would have come to blows. They were an isolated few people on a small ship, alone in the vastness of space. Some things simply had to be endured. For the next four and a half years, that's exactly what they did.

Endure they did. Even as Kate sent out the all-important hail to the space station, the six of them were still engaged in the painstaking task of calling up data on their tablets and then showing it to the holo-recorders plainly before deleting it. Every deletion felt like a betrayal. Every betrayal made Anderson hate himself a little bit more and made Alpha a little bit angrier.

The first month after they started the deletion found two more bruises marking Anderson's face.

They hadn't even had to ration the organic matter that the synthesizer used yet. The day Anderson had started throwing paper-based colony manifests into the synthesizer in order to make food, Alpha had split his lip in an argument about whether keeping the name of every last man, woman, and child on the colony was a sacred trust.

Anderson's lip and nose had been pouring blood, and still, he'd insisted that it was. Alpha knocked his head against the wall and then stalked out, but Anderson remained convinced that one was a win.

When they reached the point of deleting their least favorite videos (but the ones Anderson was sure his mother would have liked) Alpha was greeting Anderson at the door by throwing him on the bed, yanking his pants down, and taking him forcefully, sometimes painfully, and never by asking for his consent.

About the time they reached the archives for the colonists themselves, Alpha's hands made their first circle around Anderson's throat during sex. That had been nearly a year before they found the space station at the Hermes-Eight system.

And now, after a day of celebration and a joyful use of the much-hoarded energy reserves, Anderson was afraid to walk into his sleep quarters with the man who had been built to love him.

But the fear had never stopped him before.

He walked into their small house—they'd put it close to the biosphere in the holo-design, so it had been like they'd grown up and taken jobs, instead of like they'd been forced into a smaller bubble of reality—and then into his and Alpha's room.

The room itself was... it was pretty. He kept a picture of his family there

on his old school tablet, in spite of Alpha's protests, and looked at them every day and said their names. His mother, Caitlin, with the fine blonde hair and brown eyes and a smile that seemed to stretch her narrow face. His father, James, who had Anderson's fair hair, brown eyes, and a sly, more grave smile, but a fond look as he gazed at his children.

The tablet held more than just the picture, but the picture itself was special. It had been taken the day Anderson had turned twelve. He was smiling in real, honest-to-God sunshine, and Melody was trying to shove cake down his face. Baby Mandy had two fists full of cake and frosting and was coming to plaster it on Anderson's pants, and Jen was stomping her foot and yelling at everyone to act their age. Their parents were laughing at their antics. A family friend had taken the picture, and when Anderson had found it in the archives, he had sacrificed a day's worth of power for the food synthesizer to call it up in the highest number of pixels. There was grass beneath their feet, and the sun on their faces, and glee and joy and love....

None of them had known how wonderful that moment had been, but Anderson knew now.

He'd painted the walls of this room gold, like sunshine, and made the carpet a deep green. There was a big window next to the same bed he'd made out of cannibalized ship parts, because nothing went to waste, and the window looked out on the biosphere park, so the view was pretty. There was sun during the day, of course, and grass, just like the colors in the room. Anderson wondered if he was getting the colors right—would he even remember real sun and grass anymore if he saw them? The cover on the queen-sized cot was real, taken from the stores, so it was a grim, all-purpose gray. He folded the cover at the bottom of the black-vinyl-covered cot and focused on the pictures on the walls instead.

He had a few pictures left—some more of his family, one of Bren that he'd found in the archives as well, and a picture of all of them, Anderson, Kate, Bobby, Henry, Risa, and Alpha that had been taken at the beginning, when they were all playing at love and the health and hygiene files had been the best game ever invented.

Alpha was sitting in a chair by their small workstation table, studying figures from a tablet, as Anderson walked in, and a folk-singer from his colony that Anderson had particularly adored began to sing over the intercom for the nightly recording session.

"You spent energy making a hail out into space today," Alpha remarked

without looking up. “And you’re late. Care to explain?”

Anderson swallowed. “We made it, Alpha,” he said hesitantly. “We made it. There’s a space station three days out. Real people. Energy stores. A planet below it, with Terran level gravity. A home.”

Alpha’s eyes—a cold gray, ever since that first black eye—glanced up once and then looked down. “You’re deluding yourself. This is home. False hope will kill you, Anderson. We’ve discussed this.”

Anderson swallowed. This was true, too, and as with so many other things, Anderson knew Alpha was right. But, as with so many other things, he knew that he was right too. “The sensors show it, plain as day. And it’s in the shuttle’s records and star charts, three different mentions. This is where the shuttle was programmed to go ten years ago, Alpha. This is it. We’ve reached our destination.”

Alpha nodded. He’d cropped his fashionably blown hair shortly after that first black eye, and it was now military short. Anderson had always wondered at the psychological implications of that, but he hadn’t wanted to ask. “Well then,” he said briskly, “what are you waiting for? Go cancel the holo-program.”

Anderson gasped as though he’d been slapped. “Are you *insane*?”

“No. We’ve officially outlived our usefulness, Anderson. You’ve just come in to tell me that you don’t need me anymore. Go do it. Pull the plug. Kill us.”

“I can’t do that!” Anderson thought about his life without his family and fought valiantly not to throw up or pass out. Lose his family? Again? Impossible. “You asshole! How could you even *suggest* that?”

Alpha nodded and started to prowl aggressively around the room. “Yeah, I get it. I’m the asshole. That’s fine. I’m the one who made you fight for your survival. That makes me a bad person, and I can live with it. But in five minutes, I won’t have to. All you have to do is walk out this door, go up to the bridge, and kill us all.”

“I’m not going to *do* that!” Anderson protested, angry in a way he didn’t think he could ever be—hideously angry, a black rage falling over his skin like a spiked curtain, blood thundering in front of his eyes for a textured patina of red. “These people are my *family*. You don’t *kill* them just because they’ve outlived their usefulness!”

“Not even me, Anderson?” Alpha taunted. God, he was tall. He was a good six inches taller than Anderson and still muscular and strong. Anderson’s diet had been affected by the synthesizer rations—not as much protein, not as much

vegetable matter, in spite of the biosphere—and he was underweight and fragile.

“Yes, you!” Anderson was shouting, even though Alpha was right up in his face, right in front of him, holding his shoulders in those hard, rough hands. “You’re my family. You’re a bastard and a son of a bitch, and I still love you, dammit! I’m not just going to kill you just because we’re almost to port!”

Alpha stopped that bone-jarring shaking and moved closer, smiling with that arrogant glint that had first made Anderson love him. God, he’d been so sure of himself, so in charge, and Anderson had been alone and making the decisions without guidance for so, so long.

“Yeah? Well, that probably means you still need me. Bully for me!”

Anderson flinched. He didn’t want it to be true. “You are a bully,” he whispered, and he was practically transcendent with joy when the expected blow to the face actually arrived.

“Yeah? Was that violent enough for you?”

Anderson closed his eyes. He deserved it. He deserved more. Disposing of people like they were tissue, choosing his own life over the collected lives of his colony, over their culture, over the proof of their existence. He deserved it. He deserved everything Alpha gave him.

But he’d proved today that he still wanted to live.

“That’s more than enough,” he whispered, his eyes closed, feeling like a coward.

Alpha’s mouth covered his, mashed against his until he tasted his own blood. “I think you’re lying.”

Anderson opened his eyes in real fear. This was Alpha, defying what was best for Anderson. Or was he? Alpha grinned, his mouth hard and uncompromising, and went to kiss Anderson again. This time, the kiss was soft, gentle, sweet, and Anderson closed his eyes in longing.

He longed that Alpha would be done with him quickly and that the wounds would heal soon.

Part 2: C.J.

Chapter 5 A Collective Voice

C.J.'s monitor was going off unmercifully. He groaned, stretched his nude body, and clambered over Jensen's sheets, and the five zillion multi-colored pillows on his gi-fucking-normous bed, and then over Jensen's girlfriend, and then, finally, over Jensen himself, who was, unbelievably, still stroking himself hard, practically in his sleep.

"Jensen!"

"God, really?"

"Jensen, you asshole, if you're awake enough to beat off, give me my fucking monitor!"

"But we're not done fucking!"

Oh, wonderful. He could make dirty puns in his sleep too.

"Jesus, you really *are* an asshole, you know that?" C.J. draped himself over the end of the bed, and over Jensen too, and went hunting for his pants in the puddle of discarded clothing at the bottom.

"I thought my asshole was the part of me you liked the best!" Jensen feigned hurt, and he also used his opportunity to grope C.J.'s bare bottom as it presented itself. C.J. was busy looking for the monitor—and he enjoyed the touch *very* much, especially when Jensen found his... oh, yes... his balls... and then a thumb, sliding along his crease—

"Got it!" he cried in triumph, just when that clever, clever thumb found its way home. C.J. groaned, and for a whole second—long enough for Jensen to trickle a little lube down there and massage with some serious intent—he contemplated not answering this call.

The monitor buzzed again. It was Cassidy. Her ringtone was undeniable, because he'd programmed the monitor to play an old Terran song about having ninety-nine troubles, "but a bitch ain't one."

Cassie loved that song. She liked to say she was the one bitch who was still trouble, and he liked to tell her that he had plenty of women, and more than a few men, who'd like to say the same thing.

"Dammit, Cassidy, am I or am I not planetside?" he snapped into the monitor. One of the perks of having a sister who was also your boss was that you got to be a total bear to her when she woke you up when you were down on the planet enjoying some hard-earned leave.

"You're gonna want to be here for this one, Cyril," she said, and he grimaced. God, he hated his given name.

"What, another ship full of fools who tried to get too close to that nebula cluster?" Once a year there was always someone—somebody who thought that they could brave the time-space-reality-warp of the Ariadne quadrant, complete with the madness that accompanied it. C.J., junior engineer and specialist for all weirdness space related, was particularly good at figuring out what mechanical problems were just wear and tear and what stuff was seriously bizarre—like the time-space parasite that liked to slip between the molecules of the ship's hull, scuttle along the wiring, and then make its way to the frontal lobe of the passengers and mess with the neural cluster there that humans used to regulate reality.

C.J. was good at the little mechanical details; in fact, he loved them. The big hairy psychological shit, he left that to his sister, who, in turn, would hand over the worst cases to Jensen. But the small human-engineering interfaces that frequently got fucked up in outer space? That shit was C.J.'s bread and butter.

He liked that stuff. He liked the people who came with it. Everyone had a story, and he could listen to them all. And the best part was, most of that shit? Most of it was easily dealt with. A little radiation to the right places, some medication that his sister, the space-counselor, had on hand, and it was all good. Those nice people could go on their merry way, and C.J. had another story to tell, and the world kept turning, and space kept being just hilariously fucking weird. The long-term stuff, well, that got turned over to a long-term counselor, someone more able to deal with things deeply rooted in the psyche. (Someone like, say, the big-thumbed, handsome fucker who was currently burying his thumb in C.J.'s ass while getting his girlfriend to spread her thighs and warm herself up. Jensen, you—*oh, God, yes, don't stop*—asshole!)

The basic space things? Hyperdrive side-slipping so that time turned back on itself in small increments? Spaceships developing a fear of space and needing a total memory wipe to start up again? Time-space parasites that dicked with the wiring? Electronics overdosing on a blue sun's rays and recording stuff that didn't happen? The basic, nuts—*c'mon, Jensen, don't forget those... uh, yeah... good*—and bolts, give-'em-a-dose-and-a-sympathetic-ear stuff?

C.J. was great at it.

"What's right up my alley?" he asked, and he pretended to ignore Jensen's evil chuckle as something went up his alley that made him want to pant. He was glad he hadn't triggered the video on the monitor—Cassie would never let him live it down.

"We've got a guy coming in from... Jesus, do you remember that mining colony that got destroyed? Like, ten years ago? You were still at university, squandering your education..." She paused for a second to see if he'd rise to the bait because she had more letters behind her name than he did. He had Jensen, pulling his thumb out and adding two fingers and spreading them, while his erection rubbed up against Jensen's hairy thigh and Molly caressed his backside. Who needed letters behind him?

"Go on," he said, trying to sound bored.

"C.J.," Cassie said suspiciously, "what are you doing?"

C.J. took a shuddering breath and spread his thighs a little more. Molly's hand snuck down and grasped his cock, and he wriggled in appreciation.

"Trying to figure out why you're bothering me on my month off," he said, thinking his voice sounded firm.

"You're having sex, aren't you?"

"Not. Yet." Molly squeezed, right at his head, exactly when Jensen plunged inside his ass with three thick fingers.

"Oh, for God's sake. We've got a guy who's been in space for ten years without a soul to talk to coming in three days. He's apparently tricked out his ship in ungodly ways to make the journey. Do you want the case or not?"

For just a moment, C.J. forgot that he was in the middle of having sex. "Hell yes!" he said, and then, *oh hell yes!* as Jensen's thick finger found his gland and began to massage.

"Good. Then finish your little orgy and be on the next shuttle to the station, you hear me?"

“When...?” Oh God. “When is that going to be?”

“Three hours.”

Oh thank the gods. “I’ve got time,” he moaned, and then he switched off his communicator and turned to Jensen’s girlfriend, Molly, of the mischievous green eyes and the slender, cool hands.

“Molly, shift over here a little, ’kay, darlin’?” She did, and he adjusted his position, spreading his knees as Jensen pulled his fingers out and positioned a hard cock at C.J.’s happy, stretched entrance. Molly’s thighs were open and inviting, and her labia were wet and swollen, and *ohmigod*, Jensen’s cock was big, and it looked like breakfast was *served*.

THREE hours later, he was on the shuttle, relaxed, happy, and well fed with *real* food—in fact, some out-of-this-star-system pecan pancakes that were Molly’s specialty and a big thank you from the both of them for coming down planetside and providing a little recreation.

Jensen may have been one of the best head-shrinks for three star systems, but he was also one kinky bastard, and Molly matched him kink for kink. C.J. loved them both and really loved being along for the ride, but he was pretty sure this was the last time he would be invited into their bed.

They were starting to look at each other *that* way. That totally exclusive, “I want you and nobody else but you, even in bed, even forever” kind of way that Cassie had aimed at her husband, Marshall, about six seconds after she met him. C.J. knew the signs. At twenty-nine, he’d seen enough of his friends start to settle down—not all of them, not by a long shot, but it was getting to be that time. People stopped wanting a flavor of the month in bed and started wanting a flavor of a lifetime, or at least five years of a first-time marriage contract to see if “forever” was in the cards.

C.J. hadn’t met anyone, man or woman, who had made him want to check that out yet, but then, he’d thought Jensen would be fucking around forever after they broke up too.

Apparently not. C.J. would miss the guy (and the really hot women who liked to accompany him in bed), but it sure was nice to see him this happy. A little part of him wondered if maybe he couldn’t be happy that way too. But not today. Today, he put on his shades and hoped to catch a couple of Zs on the eight-hour trip between the planet and the station.

“Hey, good-lookin’, you been having some fun planetside?”

C.J. suppressed a groan, but he liked Julio, so he pulled the shades down and gave the stocky, muscular man who came to sit next to him a lazy grin. “Hey, Jules, didn’t know you were going up this trip too.”

“Yeah, well, apparently there’s some *n*th level holo-shit going on in this shuttle. They’ve been scanning it since it made contact, and we’re talking shit like no one has ever *seen* on this ship.” Julio shook his head. “I don’t know how he did it, man. He’s like, my age, and he’s done shit my old teacher ain’t never heard of.”

C.J. laughed a little, intrigued. “I know, man. It’s like, what am I doing with *my* life, right?”

Julio turned sly, round brown eyes in C.J.’s direction. “I know what you’re doing with *your* life. Jensen still a big-cocked monster?”

Happy sigh. “Ooohhhhh yeah!”

Julio laughed a little more. “He still with Molly?”

“Yeah. I think maybe their playing days are about over though, you know? They’re getting that... that vibe. That....”

“That ‘I don’t care how good-looking you are, this bed is about to become exclusive’ vibe?” Julio laughed, and C.J. met dancing eyes over his sunglasses.

“I take it you’ve felt that vibe too?” Well, Jensen’s bed was pretty big for a reason. Julio was normally not C.J.’s type otherwise—a little too broad-shouldered, a little older than C.J. liked them, and a little too perceptive and shrewd. C.J. liked less analyzing and more fucking in his sex, but that didn’t mean Julio wasn’t damned good-looking for a man in his late forties, and they’d had fun together the last time they’d been down planetside.

Of course, anyone in Jensen and Molly’s bed was bound to have fun, right?

Julio nodded emphatically. “Oh, yeah. Well, it’s to be expected. That boy’s had his share and my share and your share, and three times what your sister could have had. It really is time to settle down.”

C.J. sighed. “Yeah, I was just thinking that. Seems like everyone’s doing it.” Suddenly his gaze narrowed. “How come you never did?”

Julio—the guy who could shrink your head, repair your holo-hard drive, and then fuck you into the ground after hours—suddenly looked very young and very sad. “Who says I didn’t?” he said softly.

C.J.'s mouth fell into a little "O." "Who...?"

"Her name was Susanna, and space is a very dangerous place."

Wow. Of all the stupid things. C.J. had never even seen the gruff holo-tech with a *woman* (besides Molly in a threesome, that is), much less someone who looked like the love of his life.

"I'm so sorry, Jules. I didn't know."

Julio shook his head. "What's to know? Besides, I'm just trying, in my own lame-assed way, to tell you that life isn't forever. You go ahead and play all you want, but if you find someone who looks good for the long haul, take them up on it, okay? Don't say, 'Hey, maybe when you get back from this little junket to an exploding star, maybe we'll talk about it'. You hear me?"

C.J. nodded, most of his morning buzz from sex and Molly's pancakes disappearing. "I hear you, I hear you. I just...." He looked out of the shuttle window, feeling the artificial gravity kick in and seeing space beyond his home planet. It looked like a green marble on black velvet, and the other seven planets in the star system surrounding Hermes, their sun, reflected various shades of ochre, gold, blue, gray, and even a stunning purple in the smallest one farthest from the sun. It was lovely, and C.J. always looked.

"Just what, little white man?"

C.J. glared at him. He was a good three inches taller than Julio, but he was also a good forty pounds lighter. His skin was also a very pale latte color, and he gave Cassidy a mental slap for getting their mother's darker skin and dark exotic eyes. C.J. had nice bone structure, though, and startling green eyes, as well as tightly coiled coffee-blond hair found pretty much only in children of a mixed-race heritage. Calling him "little white man" was guaranteed to make him feel like a child, and C.J. softened his glare with an effort.

Julio was just trying to forget that he'd shared something personal. C.J. got it.

"Just that everyone's a friend, you know?" he said softly. "Friends to sleep with or friends to play with. So far, no one's really made my heart go all soft, the way it's supposed to. That's all I'm waiting for. Someone who makes me get serious."

Julio grunted. "Yeah, but someone who makes your heart go all soft, that's dangerous. That means you don't have anything to guard it, you know? What happens if you do all that and you don't get anything back?"

C.J. shuddered, and Julio with him. The view of the planets had faded, and

C.J. jammed his shades back in place. “You’re as much fun as two tons of wet carbon-fiber wool, you know that?”

“Yeah, well, I do what I can.” Next to him, Julio settled back into his seat as well, and C.J. closed his eyes irritably and settled down to sleep off the rest of the eight-hour trip.

AND of course, after all of that, they got there and had a two-day wait before the shuttle actually *docked*. And no one knew what in the hell was going on.

“Okay, there’s one survivor on the shuttle,” C.J. said patiently, and his sister nodded.

“Yes.”

“And he’s male.”

Again, that slow nod. Cassie’s eyes were wide and disingenuous, like she was humoring him or explaining for the umpteenth time why the health and hygiene files had to be closed to over-inquisitive fourteen-year-olds who couldn’t be bothered to put on their underwear between the bathing recycler and the living quarters. “Yes, Cyril, he’s male.”

“Call me C.J., big sister, or I tell your husband when you *really* hacked the H and H files and what you did with that information.”

Cassie’s eyes narrowed. “You have no idea what I did with that information,” she snarled, and C.J. grinned. He had an idea, all right. He’d heard the sounds coming from her room. Unfortunately, he had no proof, but, well, he could always bluff. Unfortunately, Marshall saved Cassie from C.J.’s prime opportunity to give his sister shit.

“Everyone knows what you did with that information, sweetheart. It’s the same thing we *all* did with that information when we got it. The only difference is you like to pretend that you didn’t. Now do us all a favor, Cass, and stop playing with your little brother’s mind, treat him like a professional, and debrief.”

“Thanks, Marshall,” C.J. said smugly, and Cassie’s beloved, the man—or, well, male Artellian, but their species was so damned near Terran humanoid that only someone with *really* good vision could tell the difference—who had stolen his sister’s heart, glared at him.

“And you, stop threatening her with embarrassing stuff from her

childhood. Dammit, C.J., how is she ever going to tell *me* if you've made her think it's too embarrassing to tell *anybody*?"

"She doesn't want to *tell* you, Marshall," C.J. said sourly. "She wants to pretend it never happened and that almighty Cassidy of the three *zillion* university degrees only has prurient thoughts with you, her one and only in the sanctioned marriage bed."

"Well, that's better than fucking anything that breathes, oh mighty underachieving manwhore!" Cassie rasped with venom, and C.J. smirked.

"Jealous?"

Before Cassie could come at him with an electronic pad stylus set on "disembowel," Marshall stepped between the two of them. "If she's not, I am," he said smoothly. "Jensen and Molly's bed is famous, which means that probably a few too many people have been there." He looked pointedly at C.J., who blushed. "Now, you two, as much fun as it is to play mediator here, I'm going to remind you that you're both under *my* employ here at the station, and maybe, perhaps, you want to do your jobs?"

Now they both flushed, the dull red coming up hotly over Cassie's black-coffee complexion. "Sorry, Marshall," she murmured, and then she glared at C.J. like she could bully him into submission.

He stuck his tongue out at her and then nodded obediently to his boss. "Sorry, Marshall. I just want a straight answer out of the... woman, that's all."

Marshall was extremely tall, over six feet seven inches, and had almost translucently pale eyebrows and hair. He raised those translucent eyebrows into his translucent hair and asked, "Okay, what was the question again?"

C.J. grunted in satisfaction. "See? That's how oblique you're being, Cass! All I asked was how many people were in the shuttle! She told me there was one, male, age twenty-two, and then she told me that she's spoken to at least four different people on the bridge!"

Cassie surprised him then—she actually cracked a smile. "Yeah. Sorry about that. When you put it that way, it does sound sort of crazy."

C.J. held out his hands expectantly, and Cassie threw her husband a disgruntled look. He threw back a look just like C.J.'s, and Cassie's expression soured further.

"You know it only pisses me off when you side with him," she said, and Marshall nodded as though this was reasonable.

“And since I only live to make you happy, my dulcet-tongued beloved, perhaps that should cue you in to when you’re being a raging bitch. Now explain again, from the top, like a brilliant professional and not a pissed-off sister, please? For me?”

Marshall was famous for his patience, and that last “for me” had a bit of a growl in it, which was probably why Cassie stopped glaring daggers at C.J. and started from the top.

It didn’t make any more sense the second time.

“The one passenger on board is a male, aged twenty-two years, nine months, twenty days.” She paused there, probably to let C.J. say what they were all thinking.

“That can’t *possibly* be right!” he burst out again, and she nodded and held out her hands.

“Look, C.J., we’ve sent out long-distance scans, and everything there indicates that he’s nowhere near his thirties, okay?”

“And we’re sure this shuttle is from the Cancer Nebula mining colony?”

Cassie nodded. “We have the records of every ship within a twenty-five light-year radius for the last one hundred years. This one was last registered at the colony, and according to the records that they’re required to send out by ansible, this kid was born almost twenty-three Terran years ago. It’s legit.”

C.J. and Marshall met eyes—Marshall’s eyes had a tri-colored iris, black inside of gold inside of blue. That alone might have made his sister swoon, C.J. often thought, just because it was so damned cool. But pretty eyes aside, Marshall was the one who could cut through Cassie’s temper, which the rest of the known world *swore* she didn’t have, and he had one of the sharpest minds C.J. had ever encountered, as well as one of the most compassionate hearts.

“Are you sure?” C.J. asked again in a horrified whisper, and for once, Cassie didn’t take exception.

“Yeah. He’s been on that space shuttle for nearly half his life,” she replied softly. “And as awful as that is, I think it’s why the everything else sounds so insane.”

C.J. took a breath, and much of his enmity toward his sister slipped away. “All right, Cass, hit me.”

She looked at Marshall, who gestured for her to continue. “The other ‘people’”—and C.J. could hear the air quotes—“in the shuttle are holo-

generated.”

C.J. blinked, and Marshall blinked twice, and then C.J. said, “Hey, I was taking you totally seriously—”

“I *am* being serious!” Cassidy snapped. “We can see it in the scans. It’s sucking up a tremendous amount of energy—he’s almost out. But he has four or five different holos in there.”

“You don’t know?” Marshall asked.

Cassie shrugged. “That’s another thing. I’m getting to it.”

Marshall gestured for her to go on once again, and she looked at C.J., who nodded vigorously. This whole setup was... well, bizarre.

“Okay. He’s got semi-sentient holograms...” She paused again and glared at them so she could finish. “Who have been helping him run the shuttle, perform functions, what have you. They appear to be self-aware. They know they’re holo-programs. The one who’s on the com most often is a female. I asked her age, and she’s about four years older than Anderson, the actual live humanoid onboard. She introduced herself as Kate. Her husband, Bobby, usually works with her, and there’s another couple who takes a shift on deck named Henry and Risa. Apparently there’s been space debris up there—”

“There’s been meteor showers from that quadrant direction,” C.J. said absently, and Cassidy nodded.

“Well, apparently the auto-pilot wasn’t enough. Given that the entire shuttle has been converted to one big holodeck, the holo-programs have been helping to steer the ship. Anderson works as captain, and he’s up there when shit gets hairy, but otherwise, he’s working on some sort of records project for the mining colony, deeper inside the shuttle, where...” Cassie’s voice grew rough, and C.J. frowned at her. Cass was a lot of things—harping sister, raging bitch, crack analyst—but sentimental wasn’t one of them.

“Where what?” Marshall prompted gently, and Cass shrugged again.

“Kate says it’s where he doesn’t have to see the outside of the shuttle. I think... I mean, I can’t imagine. Can you? Can you imagine being twelve years old and realizing that it’s you inside a tin can for the next ten years?”

C.J. shuddered. “I wouldn’t want to be reminded either,” he said roughly, and Cass shuddered. “But that’s only four,” C.J. added. “You said there might be another one.”

Cass blew out a breath. “Yeah. That’s where shit gets weird.”

C.J. started to laugh, because, well, this shit wasn't already weird?

But Cass shook her head. "C.J., baby...."

And C.J. looked at her sharply. The last time he'd heard his big sister sound that sympathetic, he'd been ten and had fallen out of a tree and broken his arm. "What?" he asked, feeling really out of the loop.

She just shook her head. "I don't know. This kid... I've spoken to him maybe three times. He sounds... I mean, you know, if I'd been on that shuttle for ten years by myself, I'd be stark raving bugshit. There's just no other way. I'd be out of my fucking mind. You'd need Teflon tensile rope and a power-winch to get me back to myself. I know that for a fact."

"Yeah?" C.J. wondered what it was she was trying to say that she couldn't seem to find words for.

"Well, there's something wrong with him. I mean, *that* sort of something wrong with him. And none of the holos want to talk. When I ask them about the fifth power drain, they'll acknowledge it, but they hate it. They hate it, and they're *really* protective of Anderson, and whatever is going on in there, it ain't healthy. I mean, bad fucking news. I hate to say it, but this guy might be living out his days down at Jensen's little playhouse for the rest of his natural life. Whatever is going on in there, it's starting to give me the heebie-jeebies."

C.J. grimaced. "Well, does this pain have a name?"

"Yeah. The holos all call him Alpha."

C.J. couldn't help himself. He shuddered. "Well, you know, as long as it's nothing fucking ominous," he cracked. "Right?"

But Cassidy didn't smile back, not even a little, and C.J.'s shudder got bigger and badder and scarier.

Alpha.

Chapter 6

Daylight

HALF the Hermes-Eight space station turned out to watch the little K-3-458 shuttle dock in the bay.

The space station itself was roughly the size of the mining colony the shuttle came from, and the shuttle bay was designed to house starships, the kind with the enormous warp-drive engines that spanned light-years in a matter of months. There was nothing in the dock at the moment except a couple of tiny planet-to-planet shuttles that were used for the other two habitable planets in the system. They were mostly farm planets, agrarian interests, with small farmsteads of maybe a couple of hundred people per planet. There were always shuttles coming in with food for the main colonized planet at Hermes-Eight, so a few of those folks got to see the show as well.

If you didn't know what you were looking at, it was sort of anti-climactic.

The shuttle that entered the bay was about the size of a regulation soccer field. Its skids looked locked shut, so it was a good thing it was docking in a station and not on a planet's surface, and the hull was battered to the point where reentry into an atmosphere might have pulverized it anyway. That was fine, though. The space station had seen plenty of ships that looked that bad or worse over the years, and the imperfections of the shuttle seemed to make the ordeal inside that much more palatable. Well, the shuttle had survived, maybe the human being inside was okay too, right?

He was and he wasn't.

The ship docked and magnetic field that formed the bay doors closed, and there was a pause. Cassie looked both amused and horrified as she got a message on the com at her ear. She spoke into the mouthpiece and said, "Yeah, Kate, the door ramp should be on your console. I checked the specs for the shuttle, past the third dial on the left, go down a couple of switches, is it labeled? Do you see it?" There was the sound of a vacuum lock being opened. "Good," Cass finished.

She looked up at C.J. and shook her head. "Of all the things. God, ten years in space, and he didn't even know how to unlatch the door."

The shuttle ramp lowered, and the entire bay grew silent. All that could be heard was the hum of the gravity and atmosphere generators, which were housed behind the ship docks. There was a faint mumble, or so it sounded like, of conversation, and a thin, pale figure appeared out of what looked like darkness. The figure looked back, as though talking to someone, advanced, looked back, advanced, and then looked back a final time. The last steps over the threshold toward the ramp were as reluctant as a child's to piano practice, and the sloped shoulders of the young man who walked to the end of the ramp spoke of both dejection and resolution. He was terrified, but he wasn't going back.

As he continued, C.J. thought that it almost hurt worse that he was a pretty kid. He had fair hair—it looked like it had been washed in simulated sunshine recently, because it was gold highlighted in brown and it was wisp-cut around his narrow—and, at the moment, thin—face. His eyes were a deep brown, and he had unfairly thick, dark lashes around them. His nose was almost perfectly shaped except for the little flat spot on the end that made him look fey, like an elf from a Terran storybook, and his cheeks looked like they'd grow round and hard like apples if he smiled.

If he smiled.

He came down the ramp and looked around hesitantly. “Uh, Kate told me I should ask for Cassidy?”

“That's me! Cassidy Poulson-Silvering, the resident station counselor. I'm so pleased to meet you.” Cass walked up and extended her hand and smiled, and Anderson blinked slowly and then smiled back, extending his own hand.

“Anderson,” he said formally. “Anderson Rawn.”

“Do you have a nickname?” C.J. asked from his sister's side, blinking. “I mean, Anderson, it's awfully formal.”

Anderson's face went through a complicated set of expressions, as though he was doing hard math in his head. “It was my mother's maiden name,” he said after a moment. He obviously hadn't thought about this in a long time. “She... the women in our colony took their husbands' names. She said she named me after her father so the name would live on.”

C.J. wanted something hard to beat his head against. Oh sweet Hermes, was there any way he could not just totally step in it when he was trying to make conversation with the guy?

As it was, Cassie narrowed her eyes at him while keeping her over-bright smile in place. “And this is my stupid-doofus brother, Cyril John Poulson.”

“Please call me C.J.” C.J. extended his own hand and glared right back at Cassie, while Anderson looked at them both with grave eyes. Suddenly those apple cheeks popped out with, wonder of wonders, a dimple in one of them. Anderson was *smiling* at the two of them, even as he took C.J.’s hand.

“I’m pleased to meet you, C.J.,” he said, that grave smile still in place. “Your sister has been really nice to my....” The smile disappeared, and his Adam’s apple bobbed in sudden nerves. “People.”

C.J. and Cassie met eyes, and neither of them were willing to have the “people” conversation as of yet. Cassie grimaced at C.J., and C.J. shrugged and thought about the first thing he’d want when he’d just come off of ten years in a shuttle.

“So, are you ready for some real food?” he asked, and Anderson turned to him in sudden excitement.

“Real like....” His face fell. “I bet it’s freeze dried, hah?” He perked up, though. “Well, it’s been a while since those rations ran out. I bet they taste better than I remember!”

C.J. shook his head. “No, Anderson, they probably taste just as vile. But we’ve got real food here. We’re a way station between the farm planets and Hermes-Eight proper. We’ve got everything you’d want—milk, fresh bread, meat.”

“Fruit?” Anderson asked wistfully. “We had Terran import trees in our greenhouses....”

“Peaches?” C.J. offered, hoping he’d nailed it, and that thin face absolutely lit up with happiness.

“Oh yeah! Peaches! That sounds awesome! Wait until I tell Bobby....” He grimaced.

Cass tried not to look embarrassed, and C.J. made a rash decision. “Man, if they’re your friends, talk about them like friends, okay?”

“Thank you. Yes. Thank you. I’ll do that.”

The look of pure shining gratitude that Anderson turned his way did something strange and unwelcome to C.J.’s chest. No. No, no, no, no, no. Not that emotion. Not here. Not now. Not with this person.

He firmly told his chest to behave, but that didn’t seem to keep it from aching over the next ten hours.

BEFORE Anderson could eat, Cass had to give him a basic physical first. Usually Michelle, the station doctor, or her replacement, Josh, would do this, but Josh was planetside and couldn't be reached, and Michelle had had a family emergency. Cassidy, oh she with the many letters behind her name, had been it. Although she wasn't officially qualified, she was very competent at dealing with the routine medical needs in a situation like this one, and C.J. and Marshall were hanging out in the little clinic waiting room when she came out with her professional smile on. As soon as the door closed behind her, her hands started shaking so hard she dropped her stylus, and Marshall got there in time to catch her tablet before she put both hands on her knees, bent over, and tried to catch her breath.

"Cass...." C.J. was almost laughing, he was just so surprised. "Geez, big sister, how bad could it be? His thing look like a frog or something?"

Cass stood up and shook her head and then looked around like maybe the rest of the station had suddenly shoved themselves into the clinic doors.

"Look, you two, this doesn't go beyond us, okay? If Michelle had been able to get topside, she would have had to tell me, and then we could have kept it tight, but right now, it's you two, and I fucking need to tell somebody, so absolute confidentiality, you hear?"

C.J. looked at Marshall and had a sudden, acute wish that he hadn't been in the room and that his relationship with his sister hadn't gotten him front row seats to the thin-faced, grave-eyed young man who had come down the ramp that morning.

If there was something this badly wrong with Anderson Rawn, C.J. didn't want to know about it.

"Okay, Cass," he said after a moment of unrepentant cowardice. "Whatever you say. Between the gods' ears and us, alright?"

Cassie nodded. "Guys, the thing here... it's like, I mean, I've seen it before. I've seen a *lot* of it before. People locked in shuttles, or even locked on the station without leave... you know what happens if a couple is dysfunctional, and sometimes it gets bad, we all know it, right?"

C.J. nodded. Yeah. At least once a year, a two-person shuttle would arrive with a pre-entered destination, a hold full of grain, and a couple of rotting corpses who had died violent and/or self-inflicted deaths in the living quarters. Domestic abuse was exacerbated by space life. It was one of the reasons the original colonists had been so rigorously screened for psychological defects. But even pre-screening couldn't account for time, circumstance, or just plain old

human intensity when things got too close for too long.

“Okay, I know what you’re talking about, but the only people he’s been with are holograms!”

Cassie’s look was thoughtful, her fine analyst’s mind finally breaking through her initial reaction. “Yeah, C.J., they are. But you’re the one who said we needed to treat the holograms as people.”

C.J. blinked, still not following. “So...?”

Cassie straightened and took her stylus back from her husband’s hand like she had dropped it accidentally. “So we’re looking at one of the worst cases of male-male spousal abuse I’ve ever seen,” she said after a moment. “He’s got bruises *everywhere*, Cyril. Some of them fresh, and a lot of them around his neck. They’re hidden by his coveralls, but they’re absolutely livid. It’s like he’s been throttled, and not just once, either. There’s bruises on top of bruises and even some cracking in the ribs and on his cheekbone.”

“How do you know it’s spousal abuse?” Marshall asked quietly, and Cassie answered him with a grim sort of bitterness.

“Because he had an open, bleeding fissure in his rectum, Marshall, and tears.”

All three of them grimaced. Ouch. Oh fuck. Ouch.

“Did you get him patched up?” C.J. asked, almost desperate to not have Anderson in that sort of pain.

“I used the laser stitches to close up the fissure,” Cassie said sharply, “and to mend the last of the cracks in the bones. The bruises will fade. I took away the worst of it, but what I want to know is *how*.”

“Well, you said there was a hologram we hadn’t accounted for,” C.J. started reasonably, “and you said everyone hated him. Now we know why.” It sounded very logical, but C.J. thought of that smile, that blinding, generous smile, and felt a clench in his gut. *Come on, Anderson. Why wouldn’t you fight back?*

Cassie waved her hands ineffectually. “We *don’t* know why,” she hissed. “I can’t even *begin* to guess why!”

Marshall’s long, almost attenuated hand started rubbing circles on Cassie’s back. “Sweetheart, whatever is going on, it’s taken ten years for it to happen. Let’s let the poor boy put his clothes back on before we start to head-shrink him, okay?”

Cassie nodded and straightened. “He’s pretty malnourished,” she said, her

voice snapping into practicality again. “I think Cyril’s idea about feeding him was probably the best thing he’s said all day.”

For once C.J. didn’t argue with her, just let her go back inside the small exam room to do her job. When the door closed, he looked at Marshall and wrinkled his nose. “She seems pretty upset about this one,” he said quietly, and Marshall shrugged.

“I think it’s that mom thing kicking in again. We were talking about children. She keeps saying that the station is no place for a child.”

C.J. shrugged. “I liked it okay. Mom ’n’ Dad seemed to enjoy it up here. And visits planetside were really appreciated, you know?”

Marshall grunted then, and C.J. said, “What?”

“It just occurred to me. This kid, he’s never seen anything bigger than this station. Can you imagine what he’d make of planetside?”

C.J. thought of that blinding smile at the mention of peaches, and his chest gave that unfamiliar throb. “I’d like to see,” he murmured thoughtfully. “Really, really would.”

Marshall looked at him and shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. This kid is going to need an escort, and you know downside pretty well. We’ll see how it falls out. But first....”

“You’re going to need me to check out the ship.”

“Damned straight.”

“Can I hang out and ask him some questions first?”

Marshall nodded. “Acceptable.” He was about to say something else when the door opened and Anderson walked out, looking embarrassed.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he mumbled, and C.J. grinned at him.

“No worries. But I bet you’re dying for some chow, am I right?”

He smiled, but it wasn’t that blinding, sunshine-bright burst of optimism that it had been before. It didn’t matter—they had a purpose, at least for the moment. C.J. took the lead, showing Anderson around the station, feeling that unexpected thing in his chest again.

The station was laid out in a fairly predictable manner. Like a small ringed planet, circling slowly so the gravity generators could do their work, it had a big pie slice through the rings and part of the sphere to allow ships to dock in the bay.

“The corridors all lead to a spoke in the wheel,” C.J. explained, “and all of the spokes lead to the center of the station. The offices in the outer rings are all for station business, trade, military, interplanetary relations, that sort of thing. The middle rings are all resident quarters and services, and the inner rings are all the businesses inside the station.”

“What’s the center?” Anderson asked, looking around him curiously. They were in the outer ring, following the green arrows to the nearest spoke.

C.J. grinned. “Off-planet entertainment, of course! Well, besides a biosphere—need that! Otherwise, most of it is luxury hotels, gambling, shows, pleasure workers. It’s our main source of revenue. We cater to the rich and the bored and the people who just want to get the hell off the planet’s surface for a while. But watch yourself in there, bucko, that’s a fast crowd. They’d eat a sweet young thing like you alive!”

Anderson gave a faint smile. “I’ll stick as close to the shuttle as I can,” he said quietly. “I have business to do there.”

“What do you need done?” Cassie asked, bustling up officiously. “I can help with whatever you need to do. You know, we’re all very curious about your ship and how you managed to adapt it the way you did. We were going to ask permission to take a closer look.”

Anderson visibly flinched. “I....” Then he closed his eyes and swallowed and made what appeared to be a truly painful decision. C.J. couldn’t help thinking that he looked like a schoolboy in one of those old Terran vids, the kind with the earnest young men who always did the “right thing.”

“I’m going to need your help,” he confessed quietly after a moment. “We... the holodeck was using too much memory. It was going to start dumping all of the colony archives, so we... we saved them by displaying them to the holo-recorders. That way, you know....”

C.J. blinked in admiration. “It’s so simple, it would totally work. You called up the data on a vid screen or a tablet or...?”

“A school tablet,” Anderson confessed, blushing. “And we did it page by page for the journals and manifests and letters and things. But the videos and songs and media, those were playing while we were sleeping. You... I don’t know how you’d transfer that. I... I read as much material as we had on board ship, but it kind of quit at the more advanced stuff, but....”

“We can help you with that,” Cassie said quickly, and then looked at her husband. “Right, Marshall?”

Marshall caught his wife's significant look and barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Yeah, Marshall could help with the technical stuff, but they all knew what Cassie's real agenda was.

"Yeah, Cass. We can spare, say, Julio, and C.J. maybe, and they can copy the stuff that hasn't been deleted from the data banks first and then go into the holo-memory and scan that into the computers." He looked at Anderson with real praise. "The only step you missed was scanning, and we've got a holo-scanner right here at the station. It's no worries, Anderson. Your colony's memories are safe with... hey? What's the matter?"

Anderson shook his head and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "It's nothing," he said quietly. "It's... it's just been a worry for a long time." He swallowed and looked up at the three of them, his face working painfully as he tried to get his emotions back under control. He risked a smile that looked to C.J. like about the bravest thing anyone had ever done, and said, "I'll take that real food now, thank you, and then I think I'd better get back to my ship."

C.J. felt his sister's sharp elbow digging into his side, and he glared at her, but he tried to do her bidding as well. "Uh, Anderson, maybe you want to sleep somewhere else tonight? Marshall and I have to check your ship for anything hinky you may have picked up during your journey, you know? We need to do some deep scans on the engine and everything underneath the hull. Sometimes there's mechanical parasites in hyperspace that you never even knew about or radiation that your console didn't register. That's actually my specialty, and it's why Cass called me in. It might be easier for you if you're not there. We can set you up somewhere with a monitor to make sure you're settling in all right, okay?"

Anderson swallowed. "The monitor isn't necessary," he said with a hint of a sulk. Well, yes, he would feel condescended to, wouldn't he?

"We'll set you up in C.J.'s room," Cassie said smoothly, and C.J. looked at her sharply, and then watched her look away in guilt.

Oh *hell* no!

"Yeah," he said with a glare at his sister. "We'll set you up in my room."

They turned down the nearby spoke and stopped at the food court that occupied the middle of it. C.J. liked this spot because the proprietor had a long-standing romantic arrangement with one of the freight shuttle captains, and the fruit selection was *outstanding*. He'd also put in a live-action holo on the ceiling, so it looked like they were looking at the rainbow of planets stretched out beyond the station toward Hermes-Eight-Prime.

“Here, Anderson,” C.J. said smoothly, still glaring at his sister. “You and Marshall stake out a table, Cassidy Jeanette and I will go scare us up some chow.”

Cassie flinched. “Okay, Cyril John,” she muttered, still trying to act like she hadn’t done anything wrong. “That’s a great idea!”

C.J. grabbed her elbow and hauled her barely outside of earshot. “You had my room *monitored*?” he growled.

She shot back, “It was Mom and Dad’s idea!” before he’d even finished speaking.

“Mom and Dad? Are you *shitting me*?”

Cassie looked back over her shoulder, where C.J. could see Marshall’s “You got yourself into this, dear” look written plain across his face. “You know what a horndog you were, C.J.! They... they just didn’t want you to nail anything that was, you know, poisonous, or whose culture said one night meant matrimony or something. We haven’t used it in years, because, you know....”

“I’ve got better sense than that!” C.J. snarled, and Cassie grimaced again.

“Yeah. You had better sense than that back then too. I didn’t... I mean *we* didn’t see it until after the monitor had been all set up and everything and....”

“When?” he asked, his voice unforgiving.

Cassie had to stop and think. “Uhm... Zalandra, I think. Yeah, I think she was the last date we saw there, but it might have been Clint from that casino downside.”

C.J. frowned. “Zalandra... that was... that was right after I got here!”

Cassie nodded vigorously. “See? I told you, C.J., once I... I mean we figured out that you were, you know, using your head, we didn’t peek, I swear!”

C.J. just looked at her in disgust and shook his head. “I cannot believe you, Cass. You know that? Not everyone meets their husband at a virginal eighteen. You really have to ride herd over my love life from a molecular level?”

Cassie winced but tried to maintain her dignity. “I’ve *seen* the pictures of Jensen and Molly, C.J., with you in there with them. There is *nothing* molecular about that couple!”

“Jensen’s a good guy, and Molly’s a damned sight sweeter than you are!” he growled.

“Well, *I’m* not going down on you in front of my husband, now am I?” she snapped back, and then both of them stopped and grimaced.

“Ewwwwwww!” he muttered, and she agreed.

“Worst. Example. Ever. Sorry about that, C.J. You’re right, okay? You’re right, I... we... *I* was wrong, and we should have trusted you, but, seriously, it was seven years ago. Until I thought about where to put Anderson up, I didn’t even think about it.”

C.J. shook his head, still disgruntled. “Cass, you keep telling me that I didn’t get this job through nepotism alone. Do me a favor and... just, you know, have a little faith in me, okay?”

Cass pulled up one side of her mouth. “Yeah, well, just once you try not to think with that thing between your legs, and I’ll try that whole credit thing.” With that, Cassie flounced off to give her and Marshall’s order, and C.J. made faces behind her back, because if she could be an immature princess snot-bag, well, then so could he.

With a final snarl, he walked up beside her and started placing the order, looking over his shoulder at the young man he was ordering for.

“What would you want if you’d been living off synth-rations for the last ten years?” he asked himself, but Cassie heard him. She looked behind him, to where Anderson was looking above him at the holo of the planets in their rainbow dance. His expression would go from wide-eyed and open-mouthed to pinched and fearful and then back again, depending, C.J. imagined, on what he thought of from moment to moment as he looked at the view. What part of that made him joyful? What part of it seemed to hurt? If they were going to dig into those holograms, C.J. imagined they would get an up close and personal glimpse into Anderson Rawn’s heart. C.J. hoped that it wasn’t so broken that it fragmented them all.

“Anything,” Cass said softly, obviously thinking the same thing. “As long as I could have oatmeal between bites.”

C.J. bought a portion of every fruit he could, as well as some protein, like free-range mammal-bird, and some aquatic avian from Hermes-Eight-Beta, and some hybrid grains as well.

And some good ol’ Terran oatmeal.

ANDERSON didn’t eat nearly enough. He smiled at the taste—the peaches were a definite hit—and he dutifully tasted everything, but he was obviously used to skipping meals to save the synthesizer.

“We’ll have to get you fattened up,” C.J. said with an encouraging smile. “Trust me, there’s enough.” C.J. packed the leftovers to put in the cooler in his quarters and tried to tempt him with some sweets—ice cream, chocolate, a cookie—but Anderson politely declined, looking more and more overwhelmed with every offer.

In fact, by the time lunch was over, he was looking damned close to losing all composure.

“Hey, Anderson, we still have to check out the ship, but how about I take you to my quarters. They’re small, they’re homey, there’s a vid screen with some vids I bet you haven’t seen.”

“Comedies?” That lower lip trembled in a way that was positively wistful, and C.J. smiled gently.

“Yeah. Comedies, lots of ’em. My favorite vid.”

Anderson’s smile was sweet, that open to the universe smile that C.J. was starting to associate with the peculiar feeling in his chest. “Good,” he said softly. “Because we haven’t seen anything new in a while.”

C.J. shared another look with Cassie, and then he stepped into the breach. He took the lead and guided Anderson down the color-coded beige corridors of the employee quarters ring while Cassie and Marshall followed.

“Which ones are *your* favorites?” C.J. asked, making the emphasis casual.

Anderson smiled guilelessly. “Bobby and I tend to like the dumb ones. You know, the ones that make you want to crawl out of your skin because the main character does something so totally stupid, and then in the big climax at the end it becomes this big public embarrassment? But Kate likes the ones with the wordplay, the subtle ones, where you have to watch them a couple of times before you get it all. Henry likes action movies, the kind with the one-liners at the really tense parts, and Risa likes the sweet romantic stuff.”

It was the longest, most confident speech he’d made so far, and C.J. went with it.

“What about Alpha? Which movies does he like?”

That guileless smile and the youthful enthusiasm leached out of him like calcium from a bone. “Alpha doesn’t like vids,” he said quietly. “He thinks they’re a waste of time and power. Is your apartment here in the middle? Yeah,” he answered for himself. “You said that. You work for the station, so this is where you live. It’s nice!” He smiled as they came out of the spoke to the middle hub. “I like that the living quarters have carpet. We didn’t have any carpet at the

colony. Things were pretty spare.”

C.J. looked down at the short-cropped, easy-care tan and blue carpet beneath his feet and realized he’d never really thought of it before. “Yeah,” he said, surprised. “We’ve got it pretty good. Here we are.” He looked up at Cass, who nodded. “Cass and Marshall are going to go take a look at your ship and get the download of the remaining info started, and I’ll get you situated here. Is that okay?”

Anderson bit his lip and nodded. “I, uh... I’d really like it if I could spend the night aboard my own ship. Can I do that?”

It hurt to say no.

“If we want to get your records downloaded, I think we’re going to have to have the place to ourselves for a while, okay, Anderson?”

Cassie said it, and C.J. was grateful. The truth was, all they really needed access to was the bridge. The hard, cold fact of it was that not one of them wanted to let Anderson back into his little bacterial breeding ground of whatever it was on that tiny ship that was hurting him.

Anderson’s look went from “uneasy” to “acutely uncomfortable” at Cassie’s words. “You have to understand,” he said pleadingly. “They’ve never had a night without me. They... they’re going to be afraid. The ship will go into sleep mode, and they’ll go to sleep, and we programmed the video to play for the recorder, and they’ll *know* that. They *know* that time passes when they’re unconscious, and I won’t be there, and they won’t know that they’ll wake up.”

His forehead furrowed and his jaw tightened, and he tried again. “It’s really important that they know they’re going to wake up,” he said earnestly, and Cassie was the one who spoke.

“Anderson, Kate knows me. If I tell her that we’re not going to cancel their programs, will that be enough? Look at you, honey. If anyone needs a night’s sleep in safety, it’s you. Let us take care of your friends tonight, okay? I promise,” she said somberly, “we won’t let anything bad happen to them.”

Anderson’s shoulders started to relax, and C.J. thought he’d add to the comfort moment. “Cassie keeps her promises, Anderson. She’s never let me down.”

Anderson nodded slowly, and Cassie and Marshall turned to leave.

“Uh,” Anderson spoke up, “could you guys tell Bobby not to provoke Alpha, okay? They need to just leave him alone. I don’t know what he’ll be like tonight.” He blushed then and looked at them unhappily. “He... he tends to get

angry at change.”

Cassie nodded like she took warning about holograms all the time, and Marshall gave a little two fingered salute, and they took off. C.J. noted that their hands were tightly intertwined—Marshall’s pale, slightly gold-tinted, attenuated fingers engulfing Cassie’s dark, tense little ones in all of the comfort they could give.

C.J. smiled reassuringly at the shorter Anderson and hit the I.D. panel with his palm. The vacuum swish of the door opening ushered them in.

“Warm,” Anderson said as he walked in, and C.J. blushed a little as he walked to the tiny kitchenette and the small cooler to put the reusable take-out containers inside. He liked warm colors—gold, red, orange, burnt umber, tans, and browns—but he also liked the cool ones as well. The living room was decked out warm. The walls, the couch the pillows, and the carpet were all earth and sun. His bedroom was blue and green, lavender and violet, and silver.

He opened the connecting door to show Anderson, and Anderson turned that gorgeous, open-to-the-universe smile on him. “Cool,” he said with a little perk and almost a giggle.

God, C.J. liked him.

“Yup, just like me,” C.J. bragged expansively, and Anderson grinned.

His expression faded after a moment, and he said, “I made my room yellow and gold and green. I... I really missed the sun and the earth.”

C.J. swallowed. “We get four weeks down planetside for every twelve weeks up here. I spend all my time outside. I have a yard and a garden, and I live near the ocean. God, I love it down there.”

Anderson looked at him in wonder. “Then why do you work up here?”

C.J. shrugged. “I love it here too.”

What C.J. was starting to think of as Anderson’s true smile burst over his face, making his thin, pale features look sun-kissed and whole. “So you’re like the rooms. Coolness of space and water, warmth of earth and sun. That’s nice. I like that.”

C.J. didn’t know what to say, and he was lucky, because Chips spoke up into the silence. “*Chips is a dirty bird!*”

Anderson jumped about a foot and looked into the corner of the living room at what he’d probably assumed was just a decoration.

“What in the *fuck* is that?” The exclamation was followed by his hand slapped in front of his mouth like a child, and C.J. fought the urge to laugh at

him. The last time Anderson had been around anyone but his own peers—as C.J. was thinking of them now—Anderson had *been* a child. God, what a mindfuck. C.J. figured that part of his mission here was going to be to teach Anderson to swear in public without feeling the need of a public smackdown.

“That is a bird that is native to Hermes-Eight-Gamma. The original colonists had zero imagination, so they just called him a gamma bird, but I call him Chips.” C.J. walked up to the cage and pulled out a cracker he’d pocketed just for this reason. “Right, Chips? Did you miss me?”

“*C.J. stop fucking around!*” Chips squawked, and C.J.’s eyes narrowed.

“Can we say, ‘Cassie shut your trap’, Chips? Can we? Let’s practice that now, so you can say it when I catch up on my leave. ‘Cassie shut your trap’, okay?” He fed the squat little gamma bird pieces of cracker through the cage bars, careful of the bird’s thick, curved beak. Chips had been molting two weeks ago, but that all seemed to be done with, and his long, curling feathers in all shades of purple were growing back in nicely.

“*C.J. stop fucking around!*” Chips squawked again, and C.J. sighed.

“Man, I don’t know what I’m going to do to get her back for that, but it’s going to be something dire. Bitch. I hope she gets hives!”

“Stop it!” Anderson snapped, and C.J. turned to him in surprise.

“Hey, man, I didn’t mean it. Cassie and I go back and forth—older sisters, you know!”

“Stop being mean,” Anderson insisted. “Don’t say mean things. Don’t say them, not to your family. Don’t ever say them, because they’re there, in your head, forever. Don’t say them!” His shoulders hunched as his face crumpled, and his chin was tight in that way that C.J. realized indicated a true level of emotional upset.

C.J. dropped the last of the cracker in the bird’s cage and held up his hands. “Okay, I swear. I won’t say mean things about my....” He paused to edit all epithets like meddling, pompous, irritating, bitchy, and moody. “Beloved older sister. I promise. No being mean. I swear.”

Anderson nodded his head like he could live with that, and then his entire body was overtaken by a single, jaw-cracking yawn.

C.J. said, “Wait here!” Then he disappeared into his room and came back with some yellow sleep shorts and a green T-shirt, all in soft cotton and not the scratchy synth of the coveralls. “Here, go ahead and change, and I’ll show you how to call up the vids. Once I get you settled, I’ve got to go help Cass, but you

can watch any vid you want and then fall asleep whenever.”

Anderson nodded and then gestured shyly to the room. “Can I go in there to change?”

C.J. blinked. It was... it was such a maiden girl thing to do—certainly not the reaction of a young man who’d been living in space for ten years. Those sorts of inhibitions tended to die quickly when you were thrust into a small space with a lot of people. But then, C.J. had to concede in the same thought, holo-figures could disappear into their own rooms at will, couldn’t they?

“Knock yourself out,” he said lightly. “I’m going to set up the vids.”

While Anderson was in the other room, C.J. gave Cassie a quick call to verify that the damned monitor feeds were in both rooms and then turned on the vid screen that took up much of the wall between the living room and the bedroom.

Anderson came in and lit up appreciatively. “It’s so big.” He blinked his eyes. “I guess I could have made mine that big. God, I’m so stupid. I spent ten years watching vids from my school tablet propped up on a table. Jesus, no wonder Alpha—” He stopped talking abruptly.

“It’s probably just as well,” C.J. said smoothly, pretending the mysterious Alpha had never been mentioned. “You were running pretty low on fuel when you got here. And man, no one’s said anything about it, because we didn’t want to make you self-conscious, but we’re all pretty damned impressed, you know? You got here, and you’re not stark raving bugshit. Anderson, that is one hell of an accomplishment, you’ve got to know that!”

Anderson gave him an inscrutable look. “It’s nice that you think so,” he said faintly. He seemed to fall into the couch then, boneless, like a cat exhausted by the weight of its fur and the world at large. “I think the gravity is higher here on the station,” he said in explanation, and C.J. nodded.

“Yeah, we try to keep it as close to Hermes-Eight-Prime as we possibly can. I think your little shuttle probably had a much lower setting. We’ll have to check it, and then we can get you a workout regimen to help acclimate you. You’re going to be conking out for a while, there’s no two ways about it.”

Anderson looked at him unhappily. “Are you sure I can’t go back to my shuttle?” He crossed his arms in front of him, and the T-shirt wrapped around his body, pulling low at the neck. The bruises that had so affected Cassie were there, faded now with the ultrasonic mending Cassie had given him, but still very distinct fingerprints wrapping around the soft flesh of Anderson’s throat.

“Yeah,” C.J. said, pretending like his own jaw wasn’t tight and he wasn’t

feeling the urge to just cuddle the guy like a teddy bear and not a tough, surviving adult. “I think you managed to stay alive and sane for ten years. We need to make sure there’s nothing left in there that can hurt you.”

Anderson nodded, and C.J. moved forward and pressed the remote control for the vid screen into his hand. “There’s games under this file, and comedy vids here. My favorite,” he said as he flipped through a couple of titles, “is this one, *Privateer’s Dream*. You’ll like it.”

“Is there kissing?” Anderson asked, his voice sleepy even as C.J. neared the door.

“Only a little, at the end. A girl and a boy.”

“Good,” Anderson murmured. “I like it when it ends happy.”

“It doesn’t have to be a girl and a boy to end happy,” C.J. objected, and Anderson turned a half-lidded, dreamy smile toward him.

“I know,” he said. “I like two boys or two girls at the end too. As long as it ends with a kiss.”

C.J. grinned at him, but Anderson had already pushed play, and C.J. watched as he rested his arm on the arm of the couch and then rested his cheek on his arm. He’d be out in a couple of minutes, C.J. hoped as he hit the vacuum close of the door, and nothing could hurt him again.

Chapter 7

Pain of Re-entry

CASSIE and Marshall were already there, starting on the retrieval of ship's memory. They looked up when C.J. clattered up the shuttle ramp and then looked warningly at the four people who were milling restlessly behind the bridge, watching as they fiddled with the dials.

"You're sure he's okay?" asked one of the women.

C.J. looked at her critically. She had a face that was all flat planes and sharp angles and a little furrow between her dark eyebrows. Her hair was cut in one of those styles that looked best when the girl had just gotten out of bed, and she was wearing....

C.J. blinked, even as Cassie answered the woman carefully. She was wearing a pair of the coveralls that Anderson had been wearing as he walked off the shuttle.

"Kate, I promise you, we fed him and gave him some sleeping clothes, and he's probably on my brother's couch, watching movies right now."

Kate looked up as C.J. crossed the threshold. "Was it a comedy vid?" she asked with a faint smile, and C.J. nodded, looking at Cassie with wide eyes.

"It was my favorite," he said, glaring when Cassie ignored him completely. "Actually, *Cassidy*, if you want Kate here to calm down, why don't you call up the feed on the monitor. That way, the hol—uh, Anderson's friends won't worry while he's sleeping."

"We're holograms," Kate snapped. "Don't worry. We're aware. But you're pumping energy through our matrix, and now we're all restless with nowhere to go."

C.J. blinked and looked around. The bridge mashed up against the front door of what looked like the bottom half of a two-story yellow house. "Uh, why don't you go home?" he asked, looking at the cheerful white door.

"Because we want to make sure he's okay!" said the brown-haired young man next to Kate. He had a dimple and a wide, friendly smile and cherry-apple cheeks. "Look, we're computer programs. We get it. But could you just...."

Bobby paused and looked at the small screen that Cassidy had just pulled up. "Oh. There he is. Thank you."

"No problem," C.J. said politely. "Right, Cass."

Cassidy grimaced and practically growled at him from the side of her mouth. "Absolutely, C.J. You're welcome, Bobby."

Bobby looked at the back of Cassidy's head as she worked the controls of the shuttle's memory banks, and he raised his eyebrows. "She's a little uptight, isn't she?" he asked, and Marshall retorted, "She's also my wife!" with a hint of exasperation.

C.J. winked at him, and Bobby grinned brightly and then sobered. "Well, she's being rude to *my* wife, and I'd appreciate it if she could at least answer our questions. You don't spend eight and a half years with someone without wondering where the hell they are when they're gone!"

Marshall nodded, looking a little surprised, and said, "Cassie, I know you don't want to admit it, but...."

Cassie dropped her forehead into her hand. "Yeah, yeah. But if you tell anyone about this, I'm never going to forgive either of you." She sighed and turned around. "Kate, I'm sorry I was rude. I know *you're* used to interfacing with Anderson in a very different way, but I didn't really expect company when I sat down to this routine task."

"She's still trying to keep us at a distance," said one of the other holograms. This one had a broad face, a square jaw, and blue eyes. And glasses.

"How do you know?" whispered the tiny, pale blonde girl next to him. C.J. had hardly noticed her when he walked in. She was so small that her coveralls had needed to be extra stitched, and they bunched awkwardly around her waist and at her cuffs. C.J. had no sooner had that thought than the entire scenario of holograms staying up late nights to size their holographic clothing based on real clothing sizes laid itself out before him, and he looked at Anderson's "people" with dawning awe.

"She used the word 'interface'," said the young man next to the blonde girl. "If she'd said 'talk', she would have been thinking of us as human."

Cassie grimaced. "Look, guys, I hate to break this to you—"

"We know!" Kate said, standing in front of the little blonde girl and her... husband? They were holding hands. "Look, we know what we are to *you*, okay? What you don't seem to realize is what we have been to *Anderson*." Kate gestured to the screen, where Anderson stretched out on C.J.'s couch with his

head on his arm, his eyes closed as the colors of the vid flashed across his face. Very faintly, they could hear the sound of the movie he was watching.

“You see that? That’s the first time he’s closed his eyes somewhere *not* on this ship in ten years, eight months, six days, and....” She paused, like she was doing math. “Eight and a half hours.”

“Wait,” C.J. said, holding up his hands. “You just said you’ve only known him for eight and a half years!”

“He was twelve when he was thrown on the ship,” Bobby snapped protectively. “What, did you think he just jumped into the ship and learned advanced holo-science in the first day?”

C.J. pinched the bridge of his nose. “He spent two years in the ship alone, learning holo-science so he could program you?”

Next to him, he could hear Cassie swear. “Oh, Jesus. Poor Anderson. What was he like when you came online?”

Bobby looked at Kate. “I don’t know. Kate was the first one of us online. By the time I came along, he was a very young version of who you saw get off the ship.” Bobby’s voice sank a little, and Kate grabbed his hand and kissed it. “He smiled more. He laughed a lot. He liked creating amusement parks on the holodeck.”

C.J. relaxed a little. “That boy is still there,” he said, thinking about the search for fruit and the perfect comedy vid. “Kate, do you have any idea why you were first?”

Kate shook her head. “I know....” She frowned. “It’s probably in holodeck records, but I had a prototype. He canceled her—”

“He did what?” Bobby asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I know,” Kate said, still thinking. “He canceled her.”

“Why is that strange?” Cassie asked, but C.J., watching the little family look at each other, read each other’s cues, simply interact like true people, began to have an inkling.

“He didn’t like cancelling programs, or changing us, either,” the young man with the glasses said. “Uh, I’m Henry, and you would be...?” He extended his hand meaningfully, and C.J. smiled, getting the hint.

“I’m C.J.,” he said, extending his hand. “And if they haven’t introduced themselves as humans, this is Cassie—”

“We’ve met her,” Kate said dryly. “She was a lot nicer when we were piloting the big scary shuttle.”

Cassie grimaced. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding sincere. "I... I'm trained to work with people and to think of holograms as simply extensions of their programmers. I've... we've never had holograms that moved independently of their programming."

"Well, we're programmed to move independently," whispered the tiny blonde girl resentfully, and Henry looked at her fondly and took her hand to his lips.

"Yes, we are, sweetheart," he said softly. He looked at all of them. "This is Risa. She's my wife."

C.J. blinked. "Man, we're going to have to get Julio in here to talk to you," he said, almost overwhelmed by the number of improvements Anderson had made on what they knew as the basic hologram program. Holograms were good sparring partners, opponents in chess or video games, or even role-playing games, as long as their settings were on low-impact. They were not, as a rule, conversationalists or friends or... family.

"Wait," Marshall was saying. "Why wouldn't he cancel you or reprogram you?"

"Well, he had to cancel a lot of us when we started doing the power drain calculations," Kate said practically. "But that...."

Her hand and Bobby's were so tightly intertwined that her knuckles were white. C.J. noted that detail again and tried not to boggle—they were saying important stuff about Anderson.

"That was hard for him," Bobby finished. "He felt guilty. I think he would have rather... uh...."

"Canceled himself," Henry said quietly. "He would have rather canceled himself than canceled more of us than he already did."

"He might have," Risa said quietly, "if it wasn't for Al...." She saw the three heads turning toward her in fear. "...pha," she finished lamely. "This is why I don't talk," she muttered miserably, and now C.J., Marshall, and Cassie were all meeting eyes.

"Where is this Alpha?" Cassie asked grimly, and Kate looked away, the action at odds with her practical, take-charge demeanor.

"You won't find him," she said softly. "He's... he's disappointed that Anderson didn't delete us all before we pulled into port."

"Why would Alpha want that?"

Kate's expression hardened. She turned toward the image of Anderson,

sleeping, and touched it softly. “You’ll have to ask Anderson,” she said. She turned and looked at the three of them. “Look, I know you won’t understand this, but I think we’re all tired of talking to you. Not in a bad way, just in an... adjusting way. Can we just sit here for a while and watch him so you can do your jobs?”

Cassie rolled her eyes as if to say, “Thank God!” but C.J. watched curiously as the other four “people” in the room gathered around the image of, well, what was he? Their father? Their god? Their brother? Their friend? Whoever he was to them, they seemed reassured that he was sleeping contentedly, and for an hour, C.J., Cass, and Marshall spoke only in that brief code that professionals tend to use when they’re about their task.

“C.J., monitor left quad data port.”

“System running. No barrier. Breach.”

“Data import, files loading. Scan next port.”

“Scanning. Marshall, what are we getting?”

Marshall grunted and took a look at the files as they flowed into the space station database. “Mostly what he said, colony records. It looks like every family had a big chunk of data invested on every ship—family records, pictures, letters to family off-world, creative endeavors, degrees, scientific contributions. I think what Anderson did was program the data to dump sort of big stuff first—family videos, favorite movies, living diaries, computer programs, that sort of thing—the stuff that took the most space. What he was left with was a thumbnail sketch of each family, including names, birthdates, and next of kin. I think he was just about to start eating into that before he docked.”

“He was so relieved,” Kate said faintly, and they all looked to where the holograms were watching Anderson sleep. Risa had actually closed her eyes and curled up at the foot of an empty console chair with her head on the seat. She snored slightly in her sleep, and Henry stroked the pale blonde hair away from her face. It was such a tender gesture, and such an unconscious one, that C.J. was utterly arrested by it for a moment.

Cassie sighed. “Look, ‘people’, I don’t want to ask this, I really don’t, but the data he was trying to preserve, that was important. I mean, I know he didn’t like to cancel you, but...”

C.J. shook his head at her, and she scowled. “What?”

“We can talk about this outside, later,” he said softly. “Right now, let’s get in and do our jobs and let them rest.”

Cassie looked startled. “Rest?”

“This is their sleep cycle, Cass. Look at them.”

Cass actually stopped talking long enough to look. “They’re....”

“They’re falling asleep. I think they’re programmed to go down when Anderson is down. Maybe that’s why they were so agitated when he was off the ship.”

Cassie sighed and rubbed her eyes. They were silent for a moment and watched as Bobby sat down cross-legged and pulled Kate down to sleep on his lap. She was long-legged and didn’t quite fit at first, and then she took Risa’s cue and put her head on a console chair. Henry sank down next to Risa and simply laid his head on his stretched-out arm above her. They continued to watch, their eyes growing heavier and their breathing growing quieter, until they were almost asleep.

Cassie turned to say something to C.J., but he never found out what.

Kate was the last one to sleep, and suddenly, she jerked, as though waking herself up. “Anderson,” she murmured, “what are you doing?”

C.J. and Cassie both looked to the monitor in surprise, and Cassie’s next sound was wounded.

So was C.J.’s.

Anderson had sat up on the couch and was screaming, mouth open, head thrown back, chest out as he sucked in air, screaming, except....

“Cass,” C.J. said, realizing that he was going to obey his every instinct and bolt out of that little ship in just a moment, “isn’t there sound?”

“Yeah,” Cass muttered, and she reached past Kate and fumbled with it. The vid Anderson was watching could be heard clearly through the connection, but nothing else.

“Oh, Anderson,” Kate murmured, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Why?”

C.J. didn’t stay to answer the question. He’d never had cause to run from the docking bay to his room; usually it was a nice ten-minute wander. Cassie told him later that he made it in about two minutes at a dead-on sprint.

He burst into the room, and Anderson was still screaming, silently screaming, until C.J. fell on his knees in front of him and shook him, hard.

Suddenly he was gasping, sobbing, thank the *gods* he was making noise, and C.J. simply folded him up into his chest as Anderson howled against his

shoulder. Eventually the storm passed, and C.J. went to move away.

“No,” Anderson gasped, his voice still broken. “You’re real. I’m sorry. I... you’re real.”

C.J. smiled tiredly and said, “Here. Scoot over. You can sleep on my lap, okay?”

That smile—sodden and torn, but still... sweet. There was still a sweet boy in that smile, one who had been smiling at the universe for over ten years and eight months, just having faith that someone would see his heart in that smile. “Thank you. Just... thank you.”

It’s hard not to feel something huge and painful for a person when they’re falling asleep trustingly in your lap. C.J. sat for a while and stroked back that wispy cut hair (would Risa do that for him, or would Kate?) and hummed tunelessly until he felt Anderson start to relax.

“Anderson?”

“Yeah?”

“How come you don’t make any noise when you do that?”

There was a silence, and C.J. realized that Anderson had started stroking C.J.’s thigh almost absently. *You’re real.*

“How come?” C.J. asked softly, afraid Anderson was going to fall asleep before the answer.

“I don’t know,” Anderson murmured. “Who was there to hear?”

Not his “people,” C.J. knew; that wasn’t what he was talking about. He was talking about the two years before the people, when he’d just been a very young boy on a small ship in the middle of the gigantic black.

“There’s someone now,” C.J. murmured, stroking Anderson’s scalp, lifting the sweaty strands of hair up so it would cool. “No worries, okay?”

But Anderson didn’t answer. Maybe he was already asleep.

AN HOUR later, when it looked like Anderson was going to sleep soundly for a while, C.J. managed to scoot unnoticed off the couch and get into his room with his personal monitor. Using the earpiece, he placed a call planetside and was actually surprised when Jensen appeared on the screen not only dressed, but dressed professionally, complete with the age-old white coat. On Jensen, it only managed to make his muscular body look even more fit and highlight his auburn

hair and green eyes. Handsome bastard.

Jensen's smile, though, was all bedroom, and C.J., still warm from Anderson's trusting snuggle on the couch, couldn't help but blush. And then, as quickly as possible, he told him about Anderson.

Jensen's analytical mind was frightening to watch in action, and C.J. was suddenly very, very grateful he wasn't this man's bed-partner for keeps. Molly was a brilliant neurosurgeon, and she could probably keep up, but not C.J. He sat there and let Jensen pepper him with questions for a while, keeping an anxious eye on Anderson from the connecting door.

"So no one's seen this Alpha since he put in to port?" Jensen said again, and C.J. looked back at the screen and shook his head.

"No. The other holos seem afraid of him, but none of them have bruises, either."

Jensen raised his eyebrows. "They're holograms! Wouldn't the bruises go away?" he laughed, and C.J. struggled to put that thing into words that he hadn't been able to tell Cass.

"Yeah, but I think he made rules for them. It's like... one of them was really teeny, and her clothes didn't fit. I could see where they'd been hand sewn, right? And I think that was part of the parameters he set. It's like... like if these were going to be his friends and his family, then they were going to be his friends and his family. He drew that line and wouldn't cross it."

Jensen stopped and started chewing on the inside of his finger. "Uh-oh," he said. "I'm an idiot. I'm a total idiot. Of course he did. Of course. He had to. It's the only reason he's still functionally sane, for the moment."

"For the moment?" C.J. peered at Anderson again. Oh God, he looked so innocent. "What do you mean for the moment?"

"Okay, C.J., I take it from the way you're looking right now that he's at your place?"

C.J. nodded. "Yeah, he's asleep on my couch."

Jensen sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Then three things, and I'm going to make it quick, because yeah, you don't want him to wake up in the middle of this. I'll send you something longer later, but, well, this is the gist. Are you ready?"

"Hit me with it," C.J. said solidly, smiling a little at how earnest and sober the hard-playing Jensen could be when he was talking professionally. C.J. hadn't seen that when they'd been in school together. In fact, for a while, C.J. had been

convinced that the hard-playing side of Jensen was the only one he'd ever see.

"It's no joke, C.J. Thing the first, they're real. Treat them as real. Call them holos, let him know that they're not flesh and blood, but listen to what they say, and when you watch the recordings of their development, take notes, then stream me the whole thing. I'm going to need it."

"What do you mean you're going to need it?"

"That's thing the second. Thing the second is that your guy is coming to see me."

C.J. felt his face go cold. "You can't. Jensen, he's too attached to that ship. We can't ship him downside to you, not right now! It'll kill him!"

Jensen shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You don't get it, C.J.—those people are people because they're all *him*."

"Didn't I see that horror vid? It wasn't very convincing." C.J. frowned, because the idea really was pretty melodramatic.

"What's so hard to see? You've got the happy one, the forthright one, the quiet one, the one who likes to keep the peace. We've all got those parts. Anderson programmed those holos, and then he set them *not to change*. That made them follow through with whatever a real human with those traits would do. When you watch them interact, you're watching Anderson talk to himself, because, quite frankly, there was no one else to talk to. They're important. Listen to what they have to say, and tell your sister that I told her so, because I know she thinks she knows everything."

"You're telling me!" C.J. said with a snort. "Okay, I got it. The holos are real. What about Alpha?"

Jensen's face hardened. "I've got an idea of why he'd program an abusive spouse. Let's just say that just like in real life, I'm betting the relationship didn't start that way. Abusers are very often triggered, and yeah, we've all got one in us. Stress makes everyone show their least pretty side, you know? You just need to figure out what triggered Anderson's 'alpha male' to start whaling on him. And when you get that far...."

Jensen shook his head, and C.J. shivered, hard, in the temperate air of the station.

"That's going to be hard," C.J. said softly, thinking about the painful huddle of holo-graphic people gathering soulfully around the image of Anderson.

Jensen shook his head adamantly. "It's going to be fucking catastrophic,

that's what it's going to be."

"He may surprise you," C.J. said, feeling earnest and hopeful. "You haven't met him. I mean... he's smart, and he's... he's adventurous. He was trying new foods, and he can still laugh and—"

"And he's been through a catastrophe and seven hells since," Jensen said implacably. "Look, C.J., I know you, man. You live your life on the sunny side of the planet. I know you're looking for a happy ever after for this guy already, and you may get one. But I'm telling you, he's going to have to take a long, hard visit down here on the dark side before that happens."

C.J. swallowed unhappily. "Well, maybe, you know, if we take good enough care of him here. I mean, we're real people, right? And we're all specialists. I mean, space madness is my bread and butter, and Cassie's got some of the same degrees you do, and...."

Jensen held out a hand, and the unhappy lines around his eyes carved bitter designs. "And that brings us to thing the third," he said, his voice unaccountably thick. "You. Look at you, C.J. You've got that whole 'protector' thing going, and you're talking about how he's smart and adventurous and the sense of humor, *damn!*" Jensen scrubbed his face with his hands and stared dolefully into his interface screen. "God, C.J., I could have married you in school, you know that?"

C.J. started to squirm on his seat. "Naw," he said uncomfortably. "I was way not smart enough for you, Jen."

Jensen shook his head. "No, Cyril. I had a ring picked out, and the restaurant... I was going to do a full-on knee to the ground, present you with a ring and a wedding date and a honeymoon *proposal*, you know? That weekend we spent at the neural-holo interface seminar?"

C.J. flinched. He remembered the seminar. The speaker had been talking about tough stuff, erudite shit, way above C.J.'s level, or at least what he was interested in paying attention to, and he'd been turning to Jensen to say something sarcastic and happy light when he saw the *true* light in Jensen's eyes.

It was like the holy light of the ultimate sun.

Jensen had been illuminated, and motivated, and inspired, and all of the things that C.J. was *not* when it had come to school. He'd had a sudden flash of their life, ten years down the road, and C.J. would be doing something interesting, something fun, but something that allowed him to have a life and interests outside his profession, and something that didn't swallow him and spit him back new and improved.

And then he'd seen Jensen, doing much what Jensen was doing now—being brilliant, working side by side with Molly, who was equally brilliant—and the two of them sharing everything, even new lovers in their bed. But she could follow him, and she was completely enmeshed in his own thinking, and C.J. had seen, on that long-ago day, that he himself would have been left behind.

"I remember," C.J. said now, remembering how much that weekend had cost him.

"It was the weekend you said we should see other people," Jensen told him bitterly, and C.J. looked away.

"You were way too brilliant for me, Jensen," he said softly.

"Bullshit, C.J.!" Jensen snapped. "And that's what I'm trying to tell you now. You just didn't want to make the effort, do the work. You could have followed me into any profession, and you chose one that you're good at but that lets you slack. You were too afraid of being smacked down by your big sister's reputation—"

"And yours," C.J. added quietly.

"And mine," Jensen conceded. "You were so afraid you wouldn't show up first that you never fucking tried."

C.J. squinted at the monitor, feeling his eyelid start to throb with looking at a vid screen for too long. "That's not true," he said, feeling in his heart that he was right. "I just wanted to live a life that wasn't consumed by what my intellect could do for me, as opposed to my heart." He tried not to cringe when he said that—it sounded way too deep for C.J. Poulson.

"Well," Jensen said with a heavy sigh, "it needs to be consumed with something. But not this."

"What do you mean, 'not this'?"

"You're serious about this kid, about this little holo-family. You're invested. C.J., I've got no guarantees for you here. This kid may or may not have come through this whole thing with his noggin intact, and even if he has, he's still going to need a visit to happy-happy land to deal with it. If you're going to let him imprint on you now like a baby bird, you need to have the staying power to see this through, because *the entire fucking universe* has already dropped out of his life once. Having one more person do it may just be the end of him."

C.J. was not expecting the wave of fear that washed through him, the terrible, marrow-deep thrill that he was about to screw something up that he couldn't repair. This wasn't going to be like breaking a lamp or flunking out of a

class or getting fired (like he had from his first two jobs out of school). This was breaking something *real*. This was breaking an entire *person*, and C.J. was almost frozen to his heart and his lungs and his innards that he was going to be the person who broke Anderson Rawn, the survival story of the decade.

He swallowed. "I'll keep things professional," he said with cold dignity, and Jensen did everything but blow a raspberry at him.

"You suck at that. It's why you lost your first two jobs! And this kid isn't going to make it easy for you. He's going to want you. Man, he just came out of a relationship that had him locked on a small ship with his abuser. You're going to be a bright and shining beacon of safety to him. He's going to latch on to you, hell, he may even *come* on to you. If you can't keep your distance, you're both fucked."

C.J. scowled. "Unless, you know, maybe I can come through for him. I bailed as a lover because I thought you could do better, but Jensen, you've got to admit, I've been one rock-solid friend!"

Jensen's scowl, his disappointment, all of it, disappeared. "Yeah," he said quietly. "That's true. You are loyal as a gamma bird."

C.J. tried a smile, because he knew his were pretty, and he tried to get Jen to smile back. "I am. So you know, I'm not going to bail on this kid if he gets attached. I'm good for that, you know it."

Jen shook his head. "I know you think you are," he said after a moment. "But this is going to take commitment I don't know if you've got, Cyril. You sure didn't have it with me, and this kid can't afford to be fucked around."

C.J. fought off the chill, and the unexpected pain, of Jen's words. "Hey, man, it's me. I don't make promises I can't keep!"

Jen muttered something that sounded like, "That's because you don't make them at all," before speaking up and saying, "Yeah, whatever. Let me know when this kid melts down, and ship the puddle of goo to me. I know how to take care of people."

C.J. scowled at the screen after it went black. "So do I!" he said to the quiet apartment. God, even he knew it sounded defensive.

At that moment, his wrist-monitor beeped. "C.J.! C.J., we need you here!" Marshall's voice was commanding and a little bit panicked.

"What in the hell?" C.J. had never been good at protocol. "Marshall, what's the matter?"

"Your sister's been injured aboard the shuttle. Report to the infirmary,

stat!”

Marshall signed off, and C.J. jumped up so quickly he sent the wheeled chair he was sitting on spinning back into his bed. From the front room, Anderson sat up and mumbled, “What? C.J., are you there?”

C.J. calmed his breathing. Marshall sounded a little panicked, but Cassie was his wife, so he was entitled. He’d just told Jensen he could be a stand-up guy, and Anderson couldn’t be left alone.

“Anderson, would you mind putting on some sweats, man? My sister’s been hurt, and I’ve got to go check on her. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Anderson nodded wisely and stood up, heading toward the bathroom. “I’ll be dressed in a moment,” he said quietly, and C.J. fought the urge to go sprinting through the station like a... a... a *mental patient* for the second time that day.

Chapter 8

Shadow Man

C.J.'s sister was going to be all right. She was, in fact, giving her husband a mouthful of hell when they dashed into the infirmary.

Cassie was sitting up on the exam table, wearing a paper shirt that tied in the back. Marshall was busy using a sonic wand to stitch a cut on the back of Cassie's shoulder, and Cassie glared up at the two of them sourly.

"Who authorized *him* to be here?" she asked, and Marshall said, "I did," with such calm acceptance that her sourness had nowhere to go.

"I'm fine," she grimaced, and Marshall took one of those deep breaths that indicated that his royal calmness was about to lose his cool.

"You're not fine, you're bleeding. Bleeding is not fine. You're bleeding, and you can't tell me what happened, and the holograms have disappeared into the house, which we don't have the codes to access, and we don't even know what hit you!"

Cassie looked embarrassed. "It didn't hit me. It hit the console chair, splintered, and the splinter hit me," she said, rolling her eyes at C.J.

"What hit the console chair?" he asked, and it was Marshall's turn to look sour.

"Of all the stupid things, it was a prop. Just a simple piece of poly-plastic that we were using to prop the vents open so the shuttle could get a little circulation. It's about four feet long—"

"Two inches wide, yeah, yeah, I've seen them, Marshall. I *work* here, remember?" C.J. said dryly. He could afford to be sarcastic now that Cassidy was going to be all right. "So how did one of the props end up splintering so hard it sliced you up like pie?"

Cassie shook her head. "I don't know. One minute, we were all watching the monitor, and we saw you burst in and calm Anderson down." She sent an apologetic look toward Anderson. "And about the time Anderson fell asleep again, I heard the snap as the vent swung shut, and then that thing went

splintering across the damned room.” She grimaced. “And then it was all about the pain.”

“And the blood,” Marshall added glumly. He finished up with the sonic wand, put the instrument in the sterilizing tray, and removed his thin poly-gloves before going to the sink to sterilize his hands.

Cassie shook her head. “If you want to worry about the blood, sweetheart, worry about replacing this shirt.” She fingered the remains of the electric-blue long-sleeved, tight-fitting non-regulation shirt that she’d been wearing as they’d started their shift. The station was privately owned—there was a dress code, but nobody was wearing standard company issue unless they wanted to. Cassie *never* wanted to.

Marshall snatched the pretty fabric out of his wife’s hands and very deliberately ripped it in half. And then in half again. And then he ripped one of the pieces into pieces. Cassie watched him, grimacing, as though they were having an entire silent conversation while he did that, and when Marshall actually spoke, his voice still mild, as it always was, she nodded meekly in complete acceptance.

“We. Can. Buy. Another. Shirt.”

“Yes, baby, you are absolutely right, we can.”

C.J. watched the exchange with wide eyes and a little bit of amusement. He’d seen this side of Marshall before, but every now and then it was good to be reminded of why the tall, pale, placid man was more than a match for his fiery sister.

“Uhm, how about I take Anderson back to the shuttle? He can show me the codes for the house, and we can maybe ask the other holos what happened, okay?”

“I think that’s a very good idea,” Marshall said, a faint twist to his lips, and Cassie nodded her head to agree. Of course, as they turned around and walked out, she had to shout, “Be careful, baby brother!” and ruin all of C.J.’s good feeling for her, but then, maybe that was her job.

“What do you think they’re going to do?” Anderson asked as they were trotting down the white corridor toward the shuttle bay. C.J. looked at him sideways. Oh my God! Was he adorable? Big brown eyes, fly-away blond hair, that vulnerable “Oh-my!” little mouth. Jensen had to be wrong. He was a sweet kid, an angel. There was no way this kid had anything to do with the bloody shirt his sister’s husband had just destroyed.

“I think they’re going to fuck like lemmings as soon as the door is sealed,” C.J. told him lightly, mostly to see the blush that blew over Anderson’s pale skin as he said it.

Anderson didn’t disappoint. “I think you’re right,” he said as even his ears turned red. “But I think they probably do that a *lot*.”

C.J. chortled and looped his arm around those thin shoulders. “I think you’re right, but, alas, we’ve got a job to do. There’s a little kiosk right when you enter the dock. You want to eat first?”

There was a hesitation then—C.J. could feel it when Anderson tensed under his arm. Then, slowly, finding his way, Anderson said, “Yes. Yes, I think I would. Do they have that mammal-bird you fed me earlier? That was *tasty*.”

C.J. grinned. “Oh, yeah. I can get you that.” He steered Anderson to the line and dropped the arm to make room for the little group of people gathered. He nodded hello to several of them, Julio included, and introduced Anderson, who looked at them all with wide, almost glassy eyes. Maybe he’d been too shocked when he arrived to understand how big the station was or how many people were really around him, but he was certainly getting a good idea now.

“Here,” C.J. said, giving Anderson a little shove to a round table with little benches underneath it. “We’re going to have to eat as we work, but go sit there for a minute while I get our food. Not so noisy.”

“Yeah,” Anderson said gravely, and he sat down without another word.

“That our spaceman?” Julio asked him, and C.J. nodded, watching anxiously as Anderson crept to the back of the table so that he could simply drop his chin to his fist and observe. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s... he’s coping.” C.J. thought of Jensen’s words and grimaced inwardly. “So far, he can function sanely, you know? But....” He trailed off and looked at the little crowd in the line for the kiosk. “I just think he’s going to be easily overwhelmed, that’s all.”

“What about the holos?” Julio asked eagerly. “I understand there’s some n-th level shit going on. I was going to go spell Marshall and Cassie for shift so I could actually work on them—”

“With,” C.J. corrected adamantly. “You’ll have to work *with* them. I haven’t talked to Cassie yet, because I can’t do it with....” He gestured toward Anderson with his eyes, and Julio nodded. “But we need to interact with them like people, and we can’t change the parameters Anderson set—at *all*. They’re

his life support right now, sort of the big anchor in the sanity pool, if you know what I mean. So you can talk to them, and see what makes them tick, but no messing around with them, okay? It would be like... like taking a chopstick and wiggling it around in Anderson's brain."

"Eww!" Julio groaned, and C.J. grinned at him and shrugged.

"Well, just keep chopsticks away from his nose, and you won't have to think about it!"

"I get it, I get it. No dicking around with the nice holograms!" Julio shuddered. "Jesus, C.J., you couldn't have found a better metaphor?"

C.J. kept chuckling and then suddenly sobered. If Julio was going into the shuttle—and into the living quarters, disguised in that little yellow-sided house—this was a good time to tell him about the suspicion that C.J. hadn't had a chance to tell Marshall and Cassidy.

"Look, man, be careful in there, okay? One of the holograms, Alpha, I think he may have been behind what happened to my sister earlier, but we don't want to say it where Anderson can hear."

Julio looked at him blankly, his mouth hanging slackly open a little in surprise. "A *hologram*?" He blinked and closed his mouth. "You're kidding, right?"

C.J. shook his head. "No. Not kidding." He looked at Anderson and shuddered, not wanting to tell the kid's secrets but not wanting anyone else to walk into the shuttle unprepared again. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said at last.

"It would be that *I* knew about it!" Julio snorted, and C.J.'s smile was suddenly very grim.

"Well then, Jules, prepare to make history."

They ended up sitting down for lunch—dinner? (Yeah, according to the station clocks, it was dinner. Shit. Anderson had just completely swapped around C.J.'s internal clock in one drama-fraught power nap! Damn if it wasn't going to take a *week* for C.J. to get back online with his side of the planet!) C.J. wanted to introduce Julio, and, well, he really wanted to see Anderson eat again.

Anderson would take a bite of something, licking his full lips experimentally, and those big brown eyes would get wide, and then thoughtful, and then he'd rub his tongue on his palate experimentally, and then—the good part. Then he'd smile up at C.J. like C.J. had just delivered him a brand new

planetary system made of ice cream, cookies, and mammal-birds, and take another bite, almost like it was just for C.J.

That, and watching him eat meant that maybe the terrible pinched thinness would fill out a little. C.J. wanted him to be stronger. Wanted him to be *sturdy*. For one thing, if he were sturdy, maybe C.J. wouldn't feel so responsible for the bringing about of those wonderful smiles.

So they sat, and Julio and C.J. told him their best stories about working at the space station—by unspoken accord, they tried to stick to the ones that would make him laugh.

“That’s not true!” C.J. was protesting as Marshall walked up. “Tell him the truth, Julio, come on, you owe me that!”

“I don’t owe you *jack*, man. I am not the one who let those little frozen reptiles out of the goddamned shuttle.”

C.J. shuddered. “I’m not either, man. That was the second’s problem. I said, ‘Hey, is it true those things freeze stuff with their pee?’ And Marshall’s second in command, who was not so bright that time out, thought I said, ‘That’s something I’ve got to see!’ And the next thing I know....”

Even Marshall shuddered as he stood behind Anderson. “Oh God, don’t make me remember.”

“Did they really freeze things with their pee?” Anderson asked, wide-eyed.

All three of them nodded in absolute sobriety. “It was horrible too,” Julio said, shivering again. “It smelled like rotten asparagus and cooked boots in a freezer. And that’s not the worst part!”

“There’s a worse part?” Anderson hung on their every word, and C.J. thought it might be more gratifying if maybe he’d heard someone else’s stories in the last ten years, but hell, if he and Julio were entertainment, they might as well give him his money’s worth, right?

“God, yes.” C.J. nodded. “Catching them, for the love of little baby asteroids hangin’ on their mama’s belts, it was a fucking nightmare.”

“See, the thing is, they froze too,” Marshall continued. The look in his eyes could only be termed “paternal,” and C.J. was glad. Marshall did the big brother thing for C.J. all the time, and C.J. loved him for it. “Their urine reacts with the oxygen, has some ungodly chemical reaction that only Cassie could tell you about, and then, once it froze the metal underneath the tile floors, their body temperature dropped, and they were these little, spiky, poison-skinned... what

did you call them again?”

“Hockey pucks,” C.J. supplied, and Marshall nodded and went on.

“And they would reanimate without notice and go just absolutely berserk. You didn’t want to pick them up without the steel-lined gloves, and the thing is, once you had them, the damned things would wake up and you couldn’t hold on to them.”

“Holy cats!” Anderson exclaimed, the expression so young and so outdated that C.J. blinked. He really *must* have been living off of old comedy vids for the last ten years. “How did you get them?”

“Oh, man, it was epic!” Julio could tell a good story—and he was all hands. “You should have seen it. Stroke of genius, really. Marshall totally saved our asses.”

“That’s not true!” Marshall said, glaring at C.J., and C.J. shrugged.

“Sure it is. Now let him talk.”

“Okay,” Julio continued, “so suddenly C.J. and Marshall go off and powwow, and then C.J. takes off at a sprint down the one un-frozen spoke toward the hub. We have no fucking idea where he’s going, right? And Marshall starts organizing us, has us all get the emergency blankets from the supplies, plus welding masks, and those gloves, and whatever protective clothing we can find in an all-fired hurry, and the entire dock was there in shit like cooking pots and anti-grav boots and whatever the fuck else we could find. So Marshall puts us at this end of the dock, then C.J. comes back, and he must have ran to the hub and back in like... what was it, C.J., fifteen minutes? And man, that’s like three miles total, maybe even more, so he was just *flying*, and he comes back, and he’s got... God, I don’t even know what the fuck they were!”

“Skids,” C.J. supplied after a sip of his fruit juice. “There’s this game in the center of the hub, for teens, mostly, but you put these things on your feet, and they glide over just about anything, they’re like carpet skates without wheels, right? And the kids, they’ve got this big room full of stuff that they can just bounce off of, but I figure on the ice, they’ll work like magic, right?”

“They did,” Marshall said simply. “And then C.J. taught me the difference between hockey and curling—”

“What’s curling?” Anderson wanted to know, and C.J. burst out laughing, because he’d forgotten this part.

“It’s this sport where you slide weights across the ice, trying to hit center.

The thing is, you're allowed to 'brush' the ice in order to coax the weight the way you want it to go. And Marshall, he didn't know a lot of Earth games then, so I told him—"

"His exact words were, 'Hockey—you know, that game on the ice with the skates', and the only thing I'd ever seen was Terran footage of people with the curling stones, so C.J. and I both grab brooms, the wide flat kind that you can swing, and after a brief lesson on the difference between a curling brush and a hockey stick—"

"I think I said, 'Whack them, dammit! Don't do their hair and make-up, jerk-off,'" C.J. said to Anderson, embarrassed and in a sotto voce voice, and Anderson gave him a shy smile in return.

"So the rest of us didn't know any of this!" Julio said, picking up the story. "We're just waiting there with the open shuttle behind us and every protective thing we can think of on our bodies, and then here comes C.J. and Marshall, and they're whacking this entire herd of ice-piss lizards, that's an official name by the way, across the corridor, and they've gotten *good* at it by the time they get around to us."

"God, I was sore for a week!" C.J. confessed. There had been a trick to lifting and scooting the things at the same time, and it had used muscles C.J. hadn't known he had.

"So was I," Marshall added, nodding emphatically.

"So they tell us to be ready, and then they start *shooting* them, like hockey pucks, up over the ice and into the blankets. And we've got two people per blanket, and every time one of those things hit a blanket, we would gather up all the corners, run to the open shuttle, and just throw them in."

"The guy had it, like, minus fifteen kelvins in there by that time, so they hit the back wall and fell asleep," C.J. explained, but Julio wasn't done with the story yet.

"So every time either one of these jackasses shoots a lizard at us and hits the blanket, he holds both hands over his head and goes, '*Goal!*' like they're hot shit or something, and it isn't until later that someone realizes—"

"That's what they do in soccer, *not* hockey!" Anderson interjected, and Julio laughed so hard he sprayed soda and pounded the table.

"That's what I'm sayin'. That whole time, we even thought they knew what in the hell they were doing!"

Anderson had a surprisingly deep laugh for such a thin, worried-looking boy, and C.J. grinned as he let it loose over their little corner of the world. Anderson had finished, and was still gasping for breath and going for a drink of his soda, when Julio looked at C.J. sharply.

“You know, I never knew that was your idea. This whole time, we thought that Marshall was the one who came up with that!”

Marshall’s mild gaze caught C.J. with surprising sharpness. “That’s because he didn’t want the blame if it went bad,” he said dryly, and C.J. shrugged.

“No worries. That meant you got to be the hero when it went right,” he said with a warm smile, but Marshall didn’t reciprocate.

“I’ve tried to promote him to assistant station master three times in the last two years. He won’t take it, but when something goes wrong, you can be bloody sure C.J.’s the one with the solution. Not bloody fair.”

Now Julio was looking at him, completely chagrined. “Really? Those other three guys wore their asses for hats, C.J., *really?*”

Now C.J. was flushing deep to the roots of his ash-blond curly hair. “Man, I got fired from my last two jobs. I really think this is more Marshall’s fault for relying on nepotism than mine for telling him no!”

He smiled when he said it and was surprised when Marshall’s face flushed to anger. Before the other man could speak up, C.J. pushed up from the table and said, “Julio, could you please tell Anderson what a fuck-up I am so he doesn’t get the wrong impression? I gotta have a word.”

“I take it you didn’t get to the shuttle,” Marshall said dryly, and then he waved C.J. off when he tried to apologize. “Don’t worry about it. I had time to get the analysis from your friend Jensen, and I’ve got to say, that’s what I’m concerned about. Do you think this... this other personality or holo, Alpha, was he the reason your sister got hurt?”

C.J. grimaced. “Hey, he beat the holy hell out of Anderson, apparently for a couple of years. But if it was him, I don’t think hurting Cassie was what he meant to do. I think it was probably just a burst of temper or something. We’ll have to ask Anderson, if he doesn’t...” C.J. swallowed and tried to keep his expression even. “If he doesn’t go stark raving bat guano on us, he might be able to help us figure out what to do with him. With all of them.”

“But for now?” Marshall was asking the question, but he really knew the answer, because he was nodding his head as C.J. finished speaking.

“For now, we leave the holos and work around them. We get our data from watching the histories, probably from day one, because I don’t know if *anyone* really knows what happened to the mining colony, and then we watch him program them and see how they interact. Anderson was right that those records are important, especially to the next of kin of the colony, so that needs to be done anyway. The rest of it is really important to the holo-scientists and the head-shrinks, and all of it is important....” He swallowed, because really, this was the part he’d wanted to say first.

“To Anderson,” Marshall said softly. “It’s okay, C.J., you can put his welfare on the roster.”

“The space station is a business, Marshall,” C.J. said reluctantly. “Don’t think I don’t know that.”

“Yeah, but we’re already getting government funding as long as we make the mining colony records public domain.”

“Not Anderson’s stuff, right?” Anderson’s adventures in holo-land seemed unbearably private. He couldn’t stand it if “boy abused by holo-spouse” was splashed on every media screen on the planet.

Marshall grimaced. “Christ, no. Have a little faith in us, Cyril. Anderson’s life will stay private until he makes it not private. But I do think he’s going to want to share a little of it. Julio says that the patents for the holo-improvements he’s done should set him up in style when he’s ready to go out and make himself a living.”

That cheered C.J. up a little. “I do have faith in you,” he said sincerely. “You know me, I land on my feet and hope everyone else lands with me. Now let’s go make sure that data transfer is going well. Tomorrow the real work begins, you know. That holo-shit’s going to punk us out, I’m telling you.”

“Not so fast.”

C.J. stopped at the unaccountably grim set of Marshall’s jaw. “Jesus, Marshall, what did I do now?”

“The Angloran isn’t working out as my second, you know that, right?”

C.J. grimaced. Yeah, he’d figured. Anglorans were sort of a nervous species. Not entirely humanoid, they tended to skitter on an extra set of legs, like a highly intelligent cross between the old Terran spiders and really big cats. X’tl’torp (the crew called him X) was difficult to read emotionally until something freaked him out and his hairy legs had him skittering halfway across the station. Apparently, there were a lot of predators on X’s world, and the whole

skittering thing was a good reaction to have. But there were no predators on the space station, and a lot of keeping things sane was keeping your own head. No. X was not working out, and everyone knew he'd started putting out feelers—not his physical ones, thank God—looking for a job on Hermes-Gamma, where even the jungle climate was a little more compatible with his physical needs.

“Uh, no, I hadn't heard,” he lied blandly, and Marshall glowered.

“Five months, C.J. He'll be done in five months, and I want you in his spot.”

“Marshall...,” C.J. practically whined, and Marshall growled.

“No. No ‘Marshall, I want to slack! Marshall, I'm not good enough! Marshall, I suck at responsibility!’ You *rock* at responsibility. Most in-laws would be whining to the skies about what dumb motherfuckers they had to hire in order to please their spouses, but no. Not me. I've got one of the most highly qualified space technology engineers with extra units in space psy in the system, and you're smart, and people like you, and you're good at your job, and I can't get you to commit!”

C.J. glared at him, feeling like a little kid. Marshall didn't do it often, but when he pulled his big brother on, he did it right. “What brought this on?” he asked, uncomfortable.

“I told you your sister was hurt, and you were right there. You sat down with that kid, called in an extra resource, and brought out a game plan. I didn't have to ask you to do a goddamned thing.”

C.J. blushed. “Well, you know, just looking out for my boy there.”

Marshall smiled a little. “Yeah, you are. But you were looking out for us too. Come on, C.J., you're so afraid of letting people down, you're letting them down! Tell me you'll do it!”

C.J. blushed a little more and looked to where Anderson was quietly finishing his seasoned mammal-bird. The boy had looked at him like he was something, someone important. Someone worth listening to, after over a decade of talking to himself.

“I'll think about it,” C.J. said, feeling an unaccustomed burst of responsibility sitting on his shoulders. “No promises, but... but I'll think about it.”

Marshall made a fist-pumping motion at his side and a long, drawn out, “Yessssss!”

C.J. shook his head. “And I’m supposed to be the dumb kid!” C.J. muttered. “Come on, you big doofus. Let’s get to the damned ship.”

ANDERSON took them into the house—not with codes, but with a key that he had to run to C.J.’s room to fetch out of his pocket.

C.J. looked at the key blankly. “That’s a real key,” he said, and Anderson blushed.

“It’s the key to my parents’ house,” he said after a moment, the words hitting the air like stones into a still pond of water—the kind of pond with a monster living underneath.

C.J. blinked. “Really?”

Anderson nodded. “It was something my friends couldn’t replicate, and it just seemed like, you know, if anyone unfriendly wanted to go see them, they couldn’t get there without me.”

It was such an odd mixture of what was tangible and what existed in Anderson’s own mind that C.J. could only nod. “Sounds... logical,” he said after a moment, but when he looked up, Julio was using his fingers as a sort of cause and effect chart, and C.J. was relatively sure that that little talisman in Anderson’s hand was the key to the tangled mess that was Anderson’s own mind.

Still, they followed Anderson inside, and Bobby ran up to greet him. They hugged warmly, and then Bobby said eagerly, “So, what was it like? You saw a new vid. Was it as good as you hoped?”

Anderson looked at C.J. in embarrassment. “I fell asleep,” he apologized. “The gravity is heavier here. I’ll have to program that into the ship. I’m going to be asleep a *lot*.”

Bobby nodded, still excited. “I can do it. Hey, you brought someone new!”

Anderson turned to Julio, who was regarding what he knew to be a hologram with wide eyes. “Yeah, this is C.J.’s friend Julio.”

Bobby gave C.J. a genuine smile. “Well then, that’s okay. C.J. takes care of you. Any friend of his is a friend of ours.”

I’ll just bet, C.J. thought dryly, but his smile was real as well. “Thanks, Bobby. Uhm, Julio is under strict orders. We’re going to be in and out, and he’s

allowed to ask you and Kate and the others questions about your programming, and you can show him how it was done, but he's not allowed to interfere, right, Julio?"

Julio swallowed. "It would be like dicking with a masterpiece, man. This old man's just here to take notes, okay?"

Bobby nodded, then grinned irrepressibly. "Hey, wait until I tell Kate that I'm a masterpiece."

"She'll say you're a piece, all right," Kate muttered, walking in from what looked to be a hallway. The inside of the house was bright and airy. The floors were made of hard wood, and there were big, intricately looped rugs on the floor and a gathering of soft-covered furniture in what looked to be a living room. The sky outside the windows was early morning, coming in from the direction of the kitchen window.

The table itself was a bright, shiny red-colored wood with a bowl of fruit on the top of it, and a narrow kitchen was in a little nook behind it. The ship's food synthesizer was the main appliance, and a mini hand-water fresher and recycler was the secondary one, but there were cupboards for dishes and decorative towels, and the tile was done in a merry little pattern of Earth farm animals.

"This is nice," C.J. said to the general company. "Did you do all the decorating, Anderson?"

Kate snorted. "As if. That was me and Risa."

Julio had pulled out a little electronic pocket tablet, and he was so surprised that he fumbled it. Bobby caught it before it fell to the ground and handed it back smoothly, and Julio took it with a distracted "thank you" and then almost dropped it again when he realized who had caught it.

After that, it took him a minute of stammering before he managed his question. "You guys... you did the decorating?"

Kate nodded, and Julio opened and closed his eyes and said, "It's really nice. Uhm, was there anything else you guys did independently?"

Bobby shrugged. "Pretty much anything Anderson does, we can do. Pick out vids, choose what we're going to do today, check the shuttle functions, program the deck...."

Julio had to sit down. "Okay, Bobby, Kate, could you get the others, and maybe we can have a little powwow? I'd like to know what, exactly, the five of

you programmed.”

“Four,” Kate corrected absently. “Only four of us programmed stuff.”

“That’s right,” Anderson said quietly. “That’s right. Alpha never programmed anything.”

“He couldn’t,” Kate replied to Anderson. “We didn’t know how to give him that, and....” She blushed. “That’s not what we were worried about when we made him anyway.”

“Wait a second,” C.J. said slowly. His eyes were getting a little glassy—and from the looks of it, so were Julio’s. “When you say ‘we’, you’re talking about...?”

“Bobby and me,” Kate said, her voice so matter-of-fact that it was clear she couldn’t possibly know how huge this was. “We made Henry, and we made Alpha.”

ANDERSON didn’t last long in the shuttle, but for a while, he sat and talked animatedly with his friends (and after watching him do that, C.J. had an even harder time thinking of them as holos.) Julio sat and made furious notations on his tablet. C.J. and Marshall supervised the last of the file transfer and then looked at each other grimly.

The easy stuff was over. The next day, the real work would begin.

C.J. had been thinking about it, and he pulled Marshall aside before he escorted Anderson back to C.J.’s quarters. “He shouldn’t be here,” C.J. said quietly, and Marshall blinked.

“We might need his help!”

“Then we’ll ask for his help when we need it. Think about it, Marshall, what’s the first thing on those recordings going to be?”

Marshall blinked. “The emergency start-up feed on the mining colony.” They both met horrified gazes and shuddered. “Yeah, I get it. Michelle will be back tomorrow, and Cassie wanted to start him on an exercise regimen in the pool to help him get used to the gravity and beef him up a little.” They both looked to where Anderson had started to wilt into the overstuffed chair that he’d been sitting in while telling the others what he’d seen in the space station. “We’ll steer him that way while we get stuff sorted and then have him in for....”

They both sighed. They were managing the life of a grown man around the reality he'd created for himself. It felt... odd, and a little wrong, and it didn't sit well with either one of them.

But the alternative—they'd seen the medical scans of the alternative, and that was unacceptable.

"We'll have him in to ask questions and have supervised visits in the afternoons."

C.J. nodded and then caught Kate's attention. "Kate, I'm going to take Anderson back to my quarters. He's practically asleep there as he sits. You can watch him on the monitor, but really, the station is down for the night, and we want to get his internal clock online, at least while he's here, okay?"

Kate nodded. "Will you let him come back before...." She shifted and looked uncomfortable. "You *are* going to delete us, aren't you?"

C.J. looked startled. "No!" he told her, and the relief that flood her strong-boned face practically generated its own heat. "No. Why would we do that? You're Anderson's friends. That would just be cruel."

Her smile was really lovely, and C.J. had a moment to think that Anderson must have loved someone with a strong face and a lovely smile, because he seemed to have invested a lot in Kate the hologram.

"Good," she said. "I... I'm glad to be here. Uhm...." And there was that smile again. "Is there any way we could get some new vids in here, then? Some comedy ones? We've been watching the same shit *forever*."

C.J. had to laugh. Who knew? Even holograms got bored.

HE WASN'T laughing the next morning.

He'd taken Anderson to his quarters and prepped the couch for him and then settled down to his console to do some work. He didn't mind being Anderson's de facto guardian, but he didn't want to let Marshall down either.

He wasn't surprised when Anderson woke up screaming silently less than twelve hours after the last time, and he was ready to rush in there and put his hands on the young man's face and smooth his hair back and tell him that it was okay—someone was there.

He was unprepared for Anderson's warmth in the dark, and the way he

smelled spicy like C.J.'s soap, and like the chocolate pie that C.J. had bought for him after they'd left the shuttle, and like Chips, the gamma bird, who smelled like lavender and mint. (None of the residents in the Hermes system had any idea why, but it was one of the reasons the birds made such outstanding pets.)

Anderson took one of those deep, shuddering, post-sobbing breaths, and C.J. stayed there, crouched at his feet, hands on Anderson's cheeks, for just a moment too long.

Anderson reached up and laced his fingers with C.J.'s, and C.J.'s breathing hitched. He really was a pretty kid—those pouty, full lips were *so* lush, and the dark brown eyes... mmm. C.J. looked at his own light green eyes in his coffee-cream skin every morning. Seeing the reverse contrast—dark brown eyes, pale skin—it was interesting, alluring, and so, so sexy.

Anderson dropped his chin then, so he could look out of those sexy eyes sideways, and C.J.'s heart sped up a little. Anderson knew it, too, the little shit. He knew he was pretty. He might have grown up alone, but he'd grown up with vids and pictures. He *knew* he was being cute. "I'm sorry I keep doing this," he apologized. "It's awfully kind of you to keep calming me down."

C.J.'s sigh came from his toes. Anderson may have known he was being cute, but he was also being totally sincere. "I don't like seeing people in pain," he answered back with his own sincerity. "If I'd been good at that, I would have been like Cassidy, lots of degrees in medical science, instead of just the two in engineering." And odds were, he thought with a little pang, he'd still be with Jensen, but it was nine years too late for that.

"Your sister just likes to be in charge," Anderson said. "They get bossy that way."

C.J. blinked. Interesting. "You had one of those?"

Anderson nodded and changed the angle of his chin so he wasn't flirting anymore. "I had three, but one was older. She was..." He stopped. "I don't have any words just yet. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," C.J. told him, trying to reassure. He tried to move his hands, but Anderson captured them tighter and moved them to his knees.

"Do you like men, C.J.?" he asked, and C.J. felt himself blushing in the dark.

"I sort of play both sides," he said, and now he was the one with his face turned away and his eyes looking front.

He was surprised at the wry twist to Anderson's mouth. "Everyone seems to," he said enigmatically, and C.J. shrugged.

"Hermes is sort of an open-minded place, all three planets. No crazy religious sects, no scary politics. You work your job, you contribute to the community, and you get enough credits to play. You feel like hibernating in your cave all day, and they feed you and ignore you. I've seen some of the footage of old Earth. I'd rather live here."

Anderson smiled then. "Good," he said. "Good. I'm glad I don't have to worry about that. I was told..."

"By who?"

Anderson shook his head. "I don't want to talk about him, okay? He's not a nice person. I would rather just... just sit here." He smiled prettily, the way C.J. had smiled at Jensen.

"Okay, Anderson," C.J. said softly, a shiver of foreboding creeping up his spine. "We don't have to talk about him. That's fair. What do you want to talk about?"

Anderson's smile was soft and sweet. "Tell me about you," he said with such utter guilelessness that C.J. found he had no choice.

He sat up then, moved to the corner of the couch, and Anderson simply lay down, as he had the night before, and rested his head in C.J.'s lap. C.J. found himself talking about planetside and growing up. His parents were still alive, and he and Cass and Marshall found themselves shanghaied into family dinners whenever they were downside. And in the quiet dark, as he ran his fingers through this pretty kid's hair, he found himself confessing that he loved doing that. He loved going out in his dad's catamaran on the great blue lake that broke up one of the eight continents below, and he loved hiking through the purple forests of the Amethyst continent with his father. He also had fun explaining to Anderson that someone really *must* have had a sense of humor when they arrived to colonize, because there was also Emerald, Garnet, Sapphire, Diamond, Ruby, Opal, and Pearl.

"It could have been a lot worse," he said philosophically. "All of the major land masses and cities on Hermes-Beta are named after flowers. I swear to God, I've got a cousin who lives in Fuchsia." Anderson's quiet laughter against C.J.'s knees did nothing to relieve the intimacy of the moment.

"C.J.?" Anderson said after a pause.

C.J.'s hand didn't stop stroking his hair. "Yeah?"

“How crazy am I?”

C.J. swallowed hard, and his hand stilled and rested on Anderson’s shoulder. “I’m afraid the vote’s still out on that one, baby,” he said truthfully.

“Why won’t you let me sleep in my shuttle?”

Oh God. “Because he was hurting you.”

“What if I deserved it?”

C.J. scrubbed his face with his hands. “What on Earth could you have done to deserve *that*?”

“I was weak,” Anderson whispered. “I was weak when I needed to be strong, and selfish when I needed to give, and that’s why—”

“Stop it!” C.J. snapped, his voice over-loud in the quiet dark. Chips rustled in his cage and then hummed softly and musically in his sleep. God love all gamma birds—C.J. certainly loved his. “You lived, Anderson. You lived, and you kept your colony alive in your records, and you weren’t squatting in a pile of feces eating your own hair, which is pretty much what we all expected when your ship made contact with us, okay? Everything else, man, that’s details. That’s trajectory calculations and rocket fuel. The main picture is that you lived. That’s a win right there. You are strong because you lived.”

Anderson nodded and didn’t say anything else. C.J. would have thought he was asleep, but the knee of C.J.’s spiffy, non-regulation coveralls with the little holo-sparkles all over them was becoming wet and briny, and quiet sobs shook Anderson’s shoulders well into the night.

Chapter 9

Late for the Launch

THE doc was back from her visit planetside, and she came knocking on C.J.'s door first thing in the morning. C.J. awoke from his spot on the couch, hazy and bleary-eyed, and he and Anderson bumped heads as Anderson sat up to let him up.

They looked at each other for a moment, sleepy and vulnerable, and C.J. felt Anderson's breath—ripe from sleep—hit his cheek in a hot burst. He actually startled like an infant when the pounding on the door came again.

"Coming!" he muttered as he stumbled over to hit the door seal.

Michelle Leighton was a stocky, no-nonsense fifty-ish woman with a sturdy smile and a comforting aura. "Hear we've got some long-term space weakness to start pounding out. Are we ready to get our ass worked, kid?"

Anderson literally peered at her from over C.J.'s shoulder, and when C.J. turned around, there was that big-eyed look again and those lips so very close to his own.

"You'll be fine," C.J. reassured him with a smile. "Michelle's awesome. I broke my arm two years ago, and she barely hurt me at all when it healed."

"Ha, ha, C.J.," Michelle said dryly. "You were so out of it I could have danced the cha-cha on your 'nards in stiletto heels and it wouldn't have hurt." She directed a kind look at Anderson. "I'm a big believer in lots of good drugs when any pain is involved. Don't worry, kid, we're just going to talk vitamins and workout regimens and maybe another pass with the sonic wand to make sure everything is all smooth. Can you handle that?"

Anderson looked at C.J. again, and C.J. found his hand with a minimum of fumbling and gave it a squeeze. "Yeah, sure," Anderson said softly. "I need to go change into my coveralls again, okay?"

C.J. winced. "Anderson, hey, Anderson, how about you raid my drawers, okay? We're about the same size. Find something you like, and we'll run the coveralls through laundry, okay?"

Anderson brightened and turned to C.J. with one of those blinding grins. “*Really?* Because I love your clothes. I’d *love* to wear something different... *excellent!*”

C.J. chuckled and watched him disappear into the bedroom, then turned around to find that Michelle was looking at him soberly.

“This,” she said with deliberation, “is not a good idea.”

C.J. winced. “I’m just being friendly,” he muttered, moving into the kitchenette to get Anderson something to eat. “He just needs a buddy, you know? I’m not going to take advantage.”

Michelle grunted. “I didn’t think you would, C.J. It’s not him I’m worried about!”

C.J. sighed. “I know, I know, there’s all sorts of damage and shit, but he just needs a friend.”

Michelle shook her head. “Well, you enjoy that ‘friendship’, C.J., because when you get attached to him and he can’t return it, you’re going to be devastated.”

C.J. popped some toast in and got Anderson a glass of fruit juice and then felt ready for the cavalier shrug. “I know better,” he said, and Michelle sighed and flopped onto his couch.

“Can I have a cup of that?” she asked. “Because if I’m going to have to listen to you bullshit yourself, I need something to make it go down easy.”

“Michelle? He trusts me. If I’m the first actual live person he’s known since he was a kid, I’m not going to dodge out on him now. Get off my fucking back, okay?”

Michelle sighed. “Great. I still need some fruit juice, C.J., but now I’m gonna season it with tears.”

They heard the bathing recycler start up, and C.J. looked distractedly around the little kitchen. Everything was cooking. Nothing was ready.

“Michelle, I’m meeting my sister in two hours to see how this kid’s life got destroyed. Is there any way we could pretend this conversation didn’t happen?”

“Do I get my fruit juice?”

“Yeah, you get your fucking fruit juice.”

“Then I won’t even say ‘I told you so’ when you completely self-destruct.”

C.J. tried a smile, but he’d barely slept, and the memory of Anderson’s big

dark eyes—with a fringe of long dark lashes as well—kept making the breath stop in his chest. “Michelle, have you ever known me not to land on my feet?”

“Yeah,” she said, taking the fruit juice from him with a nod of gratitude. “Once. I spent six hours operating on your arm so you could hand me a goddamned cup of fruit juice.” She shook her head. “This kid’s history has so many built-in landmines here, C.J., I don’t know if putting you back together is going to be as easy.”

The toast popped and C.J. tended to it. He asked about Michelle’s mother, who’d been ill planetside, and she rolled her eyes at him. He ignored her, and by the time Anderson came out, looking hidden in C.J.’s clothes, which (contrary to C.J.’s predictions) didn’t fit him at all, C.J. had a little plate to dish up, and he sat Anderson down and made him eat it.

Before they left, he pressed a credit disc into Anderson’s hand.

“It’s Marshall’s money. It’s my work account. Make Michelle take you to the employee services ring and buy some clothes. There’s a couple of shops there, spend as much money as you want, and get *whatever* you want, you hear?”

Anderson’s face went blank, and C.J. could tell he was processing the information slowly, afraid to actually verbalize what it really meant. When the entire room brightened from that blinding smile, C.J. knew he got it.

“Can we burn the jumpsuits?” he asked excitedly, and C.J. grinned back.

“We can put them in the recycler, how’s that?”

“I might save one to burn for when I finally get planetside. Will you help me make a bonfire?”

“Absolutely!” He meant it. He really did. As that knowledge landed uncomfortably on his shoulders, Michelle looked at him with a pained, sympathetic expression.

“Bye, C.J.,” she said wearily. “I’ll try to have him back by the end of your shift.”

“He’s not a prisoner,” C.J. said, although the idea of Anderson, here, in his quarters, when he got back was so very... warm. “Anderson, try not to get lost, because that could be really disorienting, but come back whenever you please. You can leave the clothes here if you like and go exploring on your own, but...”

Anderson was shaking his head, and he reached out the hand that wasn’t holding the disc to squeeze C.J.’s hand as it gestured. “End of your shift, C.J. I

won't make you worry. I promise."

"Thank you," he said, his heart in his throat, and then Anderson blushed and ducked his head.

"C.J., could you... I mean... I need a favor."

It was embarrassing how badly he wanted to do Anderson a favor. "Yeah, sure, what do you need? Sizes, a guide, a gamma bird of your very own, what?"

Behind Anderson's shoulder, Michelle's expression turned dry, but Anderson himself was abruptly very sober. "In my quarters... in my room, really, there's a last little memory cache. It's... you'll see it. You can download that to public record if you want, but... I'd really like that back, if it's okay."

C.J. swallowed. God, he'd lived in that ship for ten years, and they weren't letting him back on. The weight of that decision, of Anderson's easy understanding of it, seemed to press him a little deeper into the brown and tan carpet.

"Yeah, not a problem, if I have to wrestle my sister to do it."

Anderson's smile wasn't blinding and whole. It was little and broken, but he gave it anyway, obviously just to please C.J., and then he gestured for the doctor, a courteous gesture, probably learned as a child, and he followed Michelle through the door.

The seal went whoosh as it closed, and C.J. flopped exhaustedly onto his couch.

By the seven moons of Ariadne-Omega, what did he think he was doing?

CASSIE asked him the exact same question, only in a different context.

"Jesus Christ, Cyril, it's the boy's quarters. What in the fuck do you think you're doing?" Her voice was shrill as it came in from the bridge outside the house, and he had a moment to think that maybe he could do *his* work from the holodeck to get away from her.

"He's a grown man, Cassidy, and he made a perfectly reasonable request. Now hang on a minute, he said...." *You'll know it when you see it.*

Anderson's—and, presumably, Alpha's, although no one had yet seen the elusive Alpha—room was... masculine. The work desk was made of the same red-tinted wood, as was the end table. The walls were painted that bright, sunny

yellow, but with the darker furniture, the dark green and brown rug, and the *real* and utilitarian obviously makeshift cot, the whole thing felt... male. Not perky and young, but male. C.J. looked around and thought that maybe Anderson really did like C.J.'s living room, and then he saw it.

He swallowed before walking around the cot to the end table and picking it up.

It had been jimmied to sit propped up—there was a plastic piece of cannibalized ship furniture duct-taped to the back of it—and basically, it was a child's electronic school tablet, the kind that held their homework and their journals and the textbooks they were using and whatever else a pre-university kid could need.

This one had been set on a permanent photomontage, and as C.J. held it, heart pounding painful, singular beats in his chest, it showed him the very last bit of data that had yet to be downloaded into the station.

The main picture showed a family. Mom had fair hair, much like her son's, and green eyes. She was smiling spontaneously at her husband, as though he'd said something when the digital image had been taken that made her laugh, and even blushing a little—she was happy. Dad was fair too and had brown eyes very much like his son's.

The children were... well, less than perfect. There was a teenager with a hip-length braid of blonde hair and green eyes like her mother who was holding a plump toddler with chocolate cake in her white-blonde hair. The toddler was reaching for something off-camera and threatening to overbalance her sister, and the expression on the girl's face was a very adult exasperation. There was another girl, probably nine or so, who looked for all the world like she was giving directions to her brother, who was in the midst of shoving a truly tremendous piece of chocolate cake into his mouth and was eating it with swollen cheeks and a winsome expression that said the lure of the cake had just been too much for him to bear.

Anderson's smile, even through the cake, was as blinding and as hopeful as C.J. had always suspected, and it held so much promise that C.J.'s stomach hurt.

C.J.'s hands started sweating as he spun through the rest of the photos—one of Anderson sitting at the homework table, one of his sister, jaw clenched in concentration, about to take off from the mark at a track meet. The littlest girl grew in front of him, from Anderson holding her as a baby to a shot of her naked, the other sister chasing her through the house, both of them with mouths open as they apparently squealed in joy. Dad, sleeping with a baby on his chest,

and then a different one, holding a toddler in one arm and a baby in another. A secretly taken one of mom, looking tired and happy, sitting in the front room of a house that had probably never been clean.

He swallowed, hard, and checked the data banks to see if there was anything else.

There was.

Mom had tried—not always successfully—to have the family write letters once a year, apparently to put into the shuttle archive in case of a disaster.

It was a common practice in the outer colonies—everyone was aware of their vulnerability—but C.J. looked as the letters scrolled before his eyes and had to swallow hard, and again, and still couldn't stop his eyes from blurring.

Dear Mom, you said we had to write a letter for Melody's birthday. Can we ask the shuttle to make her not so bossy because she keeps telling me I can't bring frogs to the party, and I know she likes frogs....

Dear Mom, if we read this in ten years, is it okay if Anderson knows what a pain in the ass he is? He threw worms in my hair last week, and I almost killed him. I think he should know that it was mercy alone that spared his life....

Dear Mom, I'm really glad you had another girl this year. Little brothers suck. I'm just saying....

Dear Mom, next time could you try for a boy? That's three sisters, Mom. I'm starting to think you don't like boys and Dad was a mistake.

Dear Mom, Anderson and Melody never shut up. Thank you for a little sister who will play dolls with me. I will make a fort with baby Mandy, and we can ignore those other poo-poo heads and play.

Dear Mom, can Jen really tell me to shut up and stop fighting with Mel? She's only eight!

Dear Mom, if this is supposed to be a time capsule, you should know that I had a chance to kiss a boy today. I didn't, because he was mean to Anderson. The first boy I kiss has to respect that the only one who gets to whale on Anderson is me, and that's because I know what's best for him.

Dear Mom, if Mel gets to read this in ten years, she needs to know that I almost dumped worms in her hair today while she was making out with Mike Saunders, who is actually not a bad person. I need her to know that if it had been with that scumbag Austen, she would have been wearing worms for a hairnet, and she might not be a total loss if she has decent taste in men. By the way, Mom, Bren keeps bringing me new stylus covers for holidays and stuff. Does this mean he likes me? I'm only asking because I think I like him, but no one is going steady in our grade yet, so maybe we'll just keep playing after school. And he's the kind of boy who will help me keep that bucket of worms full, in case Mel loses her mind and decides to kiss Austen instead.

Dear shuttle archives, I'm writing this upon the birth of our fourth child, Amanda Chrysanthemum Anderson-Rawn. Forgive us for the incredibly long, involved name, but James wanted to keep up the tradition of giving the girls flower names in the middle, and we've got Melody Rose, Jennifer Violet, and we were going for Amanda Rue, but Anderson complained that he didn't have any say in having a little sister, so he might as well have a say in her name. We told him he could pick the middle name. We assume that naming his sister Chrysanthemum is a way to continue the incredible boy versus girls rancor that has made our home such a joy since he was born, but since his sisters are his family and he's stuck with them, he'll have to make his own peace with them. I know James and I are very much going to enjoy having a front row seat.

Besides, all the kids are calling her "Mandy Mum" and, well, it's incredibly cute, even for the seventeen-year-old.

Seriously, sitting down to write these letters is a good thing. They remind us that life is short and nothing is guaranteed. I have no idea what my children are sending into posterity with the archives, but I know that I am happy, grateful, and content. My husband is kind—not ambitious, but kind. My daughters are radiant and my son is brave, and as corny as that all sounds, it's what is in my heart. If our world should end tomorrow, is it so much to ask that the universe at

large knows that here, in our tiny house, we lived in joy? I hope not. Because we did.

Now, on to practical matters, should this archive be found, these messages need to be sent to....

“Jesus, C.J., what were you looking for, the lost treasure of the Sapphire caves?”

“No,” he said gruffly, trying to keep his breathing even. “Just... just something... just the last of the files from the mining families.”

He heard a noise then. The room had two doors, one to the shuttle bridge and one to the rest of the house and the backyard, which took up the entire shuttle when that was the program. He had the feeling that the computer had called up this program so much that it would default there naturally if left alone, and he was very comfortable in this illusion of a house. He could hear the others—Kate, Bobby, Henry, Risa—out in the backyard gardening, so the opening of the door leading to the house caught his attention. There was a weather algorithm, of all things, and seasons. God, poor Anderson. How he must be dying to go planetside!

C.J. looked up instinctively and caught a glimpse of terrifying, intense blue-gray eyes glaring at him from a lowered brow, and then the door slammed, and Cassie came in through the other way.

“C.J., can we get a move on? We want to get this part done before Anderson decides to come back today, all right? Hey, what’s that?”

C.J. was reluctant to hand it over. It felt... private. “It’s the records from Anderson’s family,” he said quietly, keeping his grip on it. “He put them into his school tablet, I guess so they couldn’t be erased, even accidentally.”

Cassidy let go of a breath that might have been an exasperated sigh. “C.J., honey, here. I’ll just put them into the records and give it right back, okay? Take a minute, pull yourself together—”

“I’m fine!”

“Sure you are. Be out on the bridge in five minutes.”

C.J. glared after her, because she was officious and a pain in the ass. The door shut, and he was about to follow her when he looked at the other door. Moving quickly and silently on non-regulation, soft-padded shoes, he grabbed the handle of the other door and yanked.

The man who stood there was beautiful, for a monster.

He had blue-gray eyes and tanned skin and fair hair that was buzzed close to the scalp on the sides and not much longer on top. His jaw was strong, and his eyes were set a little close together for prettiness, and he had a bold nose and lean lips, a wide chest and narrow hips, thick, muscled arms, and thighs the size of tree-trunks, the muscles bulging against the ubiquitous gray and orange jumpsuit. He was like every pinup C.J. had ever seen—every objectified picture of a powerful, strong man—and the expression on his face made C.J.'s blood run cold.

“You think you’re doing him a favor, don’t you?” hissed Alpha, and C.J. squinted at him, confused.

“By what?”

“Taking that picture to him? Those people make him weak. He’s weak. He needs to be strong.” Alpha shouldered his way into the room, leaving not enough space and not enough oxygen.

God, he was beautiful. He was electric and magnificent and absolutely possessed of his own worth, and he advanced on C.J., who felt, to his horror, the urge to back up against the bed to make room for those bulky shoulders.

“He survived for ten years,” C.J. said. “He’s strong enough.”

“Survived?” Alpha barked, curling his lip. “He survived because of me! He’s alive because I *made* him make those decisions. He would have curled up and *died* the first time he had to kill off a bunch of holograms if I hadn’t made him do it. I *made* him do it. I *kept* him alive. And now you’re killing him.”

With each word, Alpha pushed himself forward, and although C.J. kept his ground, he felt like he couldn’t breathe. God, the guy was a freaking leviathan—a brutal pulse of testosterone throbbing against C.J.’s senses, and his cock was responding, tingling, filling, even as goose bumps sizzled across his skin. “At least we’re not beating him, you bastard!”

Alpha pulled up a corner of his mouth then, and his contempt filled the room. “You think I’m horrible because I beat him? Yeah, you do that. You blame me. You think I’m a real motherfucker. Go ahead. Enjoy it. But you remember one thing....” Alpha’s eyes sparked, and he looked levelly into C.J.’s. He knew, C.J. thought, sweating. He knew about that breathless zing that was charging C.J.’s skin, making his nipples tingle, making his cock swell and harden. Alpha *knew* what he did to a body that responded to men.

“What’s that?” C.J. panted, resisting the urge to lean forward, to make it

intimate and sexual, to yield to anything that would make this more than intimidation.

“He’s me. I’m the part of him that he didn’t have the sac to own.”

“No,” C.J. said, floundering and uncertain. “If you’re a part of him, you’ve been warped... twisted... the things you did to him....”

“It’s only what he thought he deserved,” Alpha sneered. “And you? What do *you* think you deserve?”

“I deserve to not be raped by a hologram,” C.J. snapped, putting his hands up on the chest and trying not to marvel that it was warm and the fabric felt slightly moist under his palms, like the man wearing it had been sweating. With a swallow and an act of will, he shoved and felt a completely irrational surge of triumph when that perfectly imagined body stumbled slightly backward.

“Stay away from him,” C.J. snarled. “Stay away from him, stay away from me, and stay the fuck away from my sister. We *will* delete you when we know enough. The others are going to survive, but we *will* delete you!”

The look on Alpha’s face was complicated—anger, jealousy, triumph, surprise, rage—twisting the handsome features, warping him, making him ugly.

What came out of his mouth, though, was... surprising. “I didn’t mean to hurt your sister,” he said, and then he spun out of the room and slammed the door so hard the simulated physics of the holodeck made the house rattle.

“C.J., what the hell was—” Cassandra’s voice was muffled through the simulated wall, and C.J. made a little note to ask Julio about holographic acoustic dampening even as he interrupted her to answer.

“Don’t worry about it, Cass,” he snapped, unsettled and irritated. “I’m moving. I’m moving, just don’t get your panties in a fucking bunch.”

He came out of the room with the muscles in his back clenched and knotted and a jaw sore from grinding his teeth.

“Jesus, C.J., what in the hell happened?”

“Alpha,” C.J. growled, and then shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it, Cass. Not now. We’ve got a fucking job to do. Can we do that? I’ll write up Alpha later.”

Cass nodded soundlessly. C.J. usually made it a point to be professional while on the job, even if he was pissing her off—apparently that cut him some slack at the moment, because she punched some buttons and the larger monitor that she’d been installing in the front of the bridge came online.

“Are we queuing up from the beginning?”

Cassie nodded, her hands sure on the controls. “Yeah, from what I can see, the video monitors were activated around the ship for routine maintenance about twenty-four hours before it launched. The shuttles were all out of the bay and near the launch strip, waiting to be washed and monitored. These people knew their shit. Anyway...” Cassie’s chin nodded toward Anderson’s tablet, which was on the console between them, the picture of the family called up as a screen saver, just the way Anderson had fixed it. “The oldest girl, I guess her class was part of the maintenance, like a field trip or something. She’s sitting in on the classes at the beginning, here. You can see her.”

C.J. did, and she was beautiful. Her long blonde hair was tied up neatly in a French braid, but strands of it had loosened around her oval-shaped face. She listened carefully to the officer who was giving maintenance instructions and made notations on her tablet very seriously. The boy next to her—possibly the kid who *didn’t* get worms in his hair—said something to her, and she slanted a look from her green eyes as her full lips curved into a smile.

C.J. swallowed against a sudden tightness. It was the same smile Anderson had given him in the dark the night before. *Definitely* not the kid who ended up with the worms in his hair.

The monitors on the ship—eight outside and four inside—all showed the various stages of the ship being worked on. They watched for an hour or two and then sped through the footage. No one seemed to be worried about meteors or an attack of any sort. Their last day alive, and it was all routine.

C.J. wondered if it wasn’t better that way.

The shuttles stood vacant for much of the next day, and then, about the time that maybe, say, pre-university school would get out, there was movement immediately beyond the ship.

There was the girl again, and she was talking animatedly to a boy next to her—not the boy without the worms, but a smaller boy, one with blond hair like hers and dark eyes and a narrow face with high cheekbones.

Anderson.

“Do we have audio?” C.J. asked in a choked whisper. Cass pressed a button, and suddenly it was like he was there, listening to the two of them.

“Did you really get to work on the bridge?” Anderson asked excitedly. “Wow, Mel, you’re awesome! Can you show me?”

The girl worried her lip. “Anderson, I could get into a lot of trouble. Part of maintenance meant having the remote out and entering the codes, so it’s ready to launch.”

Anderson rolled his eyes. “I’m not a cartoon character, Mel. I’d just look. Do they really have holodecks and everything?”

The girl nodded. “They’re made so they can take thirty people one light-year.” She wrinkled her nose. “Which is dumb, because they’re programmed for ten light-years away.”

Anderson giggled. “Oh God, that would be awful! A big ship, full of skeletons all wasted away!”

“Ewww! Anderson! Really?”

“Here,” Anderson said with awe, forgetting he’d just tried to gross his sister out. “I want to touch it. It’s so shiny.”

He must not have realized he was near one of the outer sensors, because he came up close to it, by the door, and put out a long-fingered hand. “It’s so smooth,” he marveled. “It doesn’t feel sturdy enough to go up into the atmosphere.” He turned to his sister then, frowning. “Isn’t there someplace closer they could go?”

Mel nodded. “Yeah, they’re going to all be reprogrammed tomorrow. There’s a space station on Arachnos-Twelve that’s less than a light-year, but it’s really small—the council isn’t sure it could hold everyone in the colony.” She rolled her eyes. “But still, no skeletons in the ghost ship. Won’t that be nice?”

Anderson grinned at her. “But it wouldn’t make such a good vid, right? Where are they programmed for now?”

“Hermes-Eight-Prime. It’s about ten light-years away, but they’re trying to find a space station between the two. I guess, in a pinch, we really only need to put fifteen people on a shuttle. With some recycling and reclamation....”

“Zzzzzzzz....” Anderson was pretending to sleep, and his sister was midway to smacking him on the back of the head when something caught her eye.

There was a sudden flash of light across the sky, and both of them turned. “Oh God,” Mel muttered, almost instantly terrified. “What’s that?”

“Was that a ship landing? I didn’t think there was one scheduled.” Anderson was younger—twelve. He wasn’t nearly as conscious of his own

mortality. *“Hey, look—there’s another one. It’s closer!”*

“Oh God,” his sister repeated, and their eyes fixed in horror to a far off mark beyond the censor’s scope.

“Oh God,” Anderson echoed hollowly. “God... Mel... was that the school?”

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she grabbed his arm and hauled him to the door of the shuttle. There was a change then, as the censors aligned themselves to both indoor and outdoor footage.

“Can we focus on the in and the out, Cass?” C.J. asked tensely, and the image on the monitor split into two sections, one showing six different directions outside the shuttle and the other showing the four quadrants of the ship.

Inside the ship, Anderson was unceremoniously thrown through the door by his sister. “Don’t touch anything,” she snapped, and then, looking up, her eyes narrowed and she made an instant decision. Without hesitation, she reached across the bridge console and grabbed something oblong and shiny.

“What was that?” Cassie asked, and C.J. squinted at the object in Mel’s hand.

“That’s the remote launch control,” he muttered, and he heard Cass gasp.

“Where are you going?” Anderson was asking, his voice shrill. “Mel, don’t leave me!”

“I’m going to go get our family!” Melody said, her voice so certain that it left no room for doubt. “Stay here. I’ll be back, okay?”

“Mel, don’t leave me!”

“I’m going to get Jen and Mandy and Mom and Dad if I can! Stay here!”

Melody took off, and the shuttle door closed behind her. Anderson watched her go through one of the windows by the seat she’d all but thrown him in. He was having trouble tracking her with the limited scope of the tiny window when something caught his attention.

Cassie and C.J. watched her go through the fisheye of the outer sensor. She took off running and was almost out of range when suddenly she stopped.

“What’s that?” C.J. muttered. “Cass, can you pull back and see what stopped her?”

Even as the girl on the screen turned around and started running toward the

shuttle, the camera pulled back, and C.J. and Cassie both gasped.

There was a wall of fire surging toward her, coming from what looked to be the annihilation of half the planetoid by a huge projectile.

“Oh God,” C.J. muttered. “She’s stopped running. Why’d she stop running?”

She should have been running. The girl on the screen should have been running for her life, but instead, she had the little oblong remote in her hand and was pushing buttons feverishly, looking at the ship with a quivering chin and a very adult resolution.

“She’s firing up the ship,” Cassie said.

And even though he knew what happened next, C.J. started to urge her on, “Run, dammit, run dammit, run, dammit....”

“She can’t make it! She’s firing up the shuttle,” Cass said like it made perfect sense.

It didn’t, not to C.J.

“She can make it! C’mon, Melody, you ran in school! You can make it!”

“She can’t make it!”

The shuttle was making starting noises, and Melody still stood there, one hand to her mouth and one locked on the remote as she finished the launch sequence.

“Run, dammit, *run, you selfish bitch, run!*”

“C.J., *she can’t make it!*”

On the shuttle, Anderson was looking around frantically as the systems started firing up around him, and the instant acceleration had him pinned to his seat, even as he fumbled to strap himself in. By the time he had settled himself so that he wasn’t being tossed around like a pebble in an empty shoe and pressed his nose to the window again....

They both stopped screaming at the long-dead girl and watched through the shuttle’s censors as the planetoid disappeared in an explosion into the vacancies of space.

“She could have made it,” C.J. said, wiping his face. “She could have been in there with him.”

“She couldn’t have made it, Cyril,” Cassidy muttered brokenly. They were both riveted to the screen now, to the series of destructive explosions that were

the entire series of small inhabited planetoids that made up the colony. On the inside camera, Anderson was sitting, his face plastered to the tiny window, weeping, screaming heedlessly, his face twisting, his nose running, a frightened child in a big, shiny box, about to hurtle into the empty, echoing depths of the biggest black of them all.

He stopped screaming after about fifteen minutes.

“What’s he looking for?” Cassidy wondered as the boy kept his face pressed to the glass of the shuttle’s thick window.

“Anyone.”

They watched silently, neither one of them facing the other, as Anderson fell asleep. Without comment, Cassidy fast-forwarded, and the time stamp on the video said that forty-five minutes had passed in real time before the remains of the asteroid belt disappeared and the shuttle was in open space.

Anderson jerked on the screen, and Cassie slowed the film down as the automated voice told him that if he wanted to, he could go to the bathroom before the jump to light speed.

“He doesn’t even try to reprogram it,” Cassie said quietly.

“He doesn’t have the first idea how.”

Anderson came back and sat down. This time, his sleep—helped along by the disorientation of the jump to hyperspace—lasted much longer.

“What’s he doing?” C.J. asked. “With his hands?”

Cassie’s voice was toneless. “That’s what you do when you’re holding someone small on your lap. He’s dreaming about his little sister.”

“What’s he saying?”

Anderson was mumbling in his sleep. Cassie turned up the volume and slowed it down, and they heard him clearly. “Mel, get them. Get them. Get the family. Don’t leave me alone.”

Cassie turned the volume down after that, and they fast-forwarded the recording until Anderson sat up and looked blankly at the empty space in his lap, to his side, and in front of him. As Anderson started screaming, the outside sensors showed, very clearly, the infinite black of ten years of hyperspace, with Anderson’s voice echoing inside.

“She could have made it,” C.J. said, his voice so clogged he couldn’t recognize it. He stood up and steadied himself on the back of his chair. “That selfish bitch, she could have made it.”

“Cyril, she couldn’t!”

“She could have made it!”

“She couldn’t. All she could do was save his life!”

“She didn’t even try!” he shouted, and Cassie stood up and shouted back at him.

“Of course she did! Do you think she wanted to leave him there in the cold and the black? Oh God, Cyril, do you think I’d leave you there in the cold and the black if I had even a chance to be with you?”

“She left him, Cassie!” C.J. whimpered, so hurt to the core of him that he couldn’t stop weeping to save his life.

“She had to, baby.” Cassie moved toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist with only a little hesitation. “Cyril, she couldn’t save their family. All she could do was save him and keep the colony alive in the memories on that ship.”

“God, Cassie... tell me you would have tried. Tell me you wouldn’t have....”

Cassie sobbed brutally against his chest. “I’m not that strong, baby... God help me, God help us both, I would have tried... I would have tried... just so you wouldn’t be alone....”

They clung together like the children they used to be, children just like the ones they’d watched live and die, and sobbed.

On the screen, Anderson kept screaming while the tiny ship continued its long journey in the fathomless dark of hyperspace, where not even a star’s light could escape.

Chapter 10

Growing Accustomed

C.J. SAT in the corner of his couch and drained the three fingers of fermented Hermes-Eight-Gamma grain alcohol, wishing he had more ice. Cassie's glass—drained, and drained again—sat on the couch end table, because when he'd told her he had smuggled alcohol into his room and asked her if she wanted some, she hadn't even bothered to scold him but had just asked for more.

She'd been wobbly when he'd called Marshall to come get her, and C.J. wasn't feeling too steady himself.

Four hours of work and four hours of drinking wasn't his usual ratio, but he supposed he could manage it, after a day like this one.

They'd tried to go back—they had. They'd pulled themselves together, laughed self-consciously, hugged each other, and then fast-forwarded through the film as they watched Anderson adapt to his new surroundings and try to be “normal.” They watched him pull up files, start a school cycle, a sleep cycle, and finally a play cycle on the holodeck.

They watched him start to talk to the holograms.

They watched him realize that he was losing it when he started answering back.

They watched him wake up in quick time, five hundred times at least, to sit up and scream. They listened to the audio until, around the seventh or eighth time, he stopped making any sounds at all.

They watched him start tinkering with the holodeck. They recorded everything he did, took notes, as it were, and sent the info to Julio—even as Anderson started to program his very first construct.

It looked just like Melody. The long, butter-colored braid, big green eyes, the narrow-chinned, wide-cheekboned face. They could see it taking form right down to a small mole on the girl's cheek, and then they watched as he wandered off of the holodeck, presumably to the bathroom, and came back.

The look on his face as he saw the hologram and realized what she really

was—there were no words to describe that sort of devastation.

“Oh, Anderson....”

The voice came from behind the two of them, because they hadn’t been able to speak since they’d sat down again, sniffing, trying to pretend that this was just one more day at work, and both C.J. and Cassie whipped their heads around to look behind them.

All four of the holograms were sitting behind them in various positions, from cross-legged to leaning on each other, watching what they were watching with rapt eyes. C.J. had wanted to ask them how long they’d been there. Had they seen him and Cassie melt down on each other and cling together like lost kittens? Had they seen Anderson, alone on that ship, screaming and weeping and so very utterly alone?

But he couldn’t ask them that, because to a one, to Bobby and the stoic Henry, they were crying, wiping imaginary cheeks on imaginary clothes that felt real enough to them.

“Stop the film, Cass,” C.J. said gruffly, and she didn’t even try to argue with him. “I’m sorry, guys,” he said to Anderson’s friends. “I didn’t... I didn’t think you’d want to be here for this.”

Kate shook her head—she’d been the one to speak in the first place. “It’s okay. I just... I knew, I mean, we all had to *know*, right? But this... I feel it... in my stomach, I feel how awful....” She pulled in a deep, shuddering breath and choked a little sob.

C.J. nodded. “Do you guys have alcohol? Holographic grain pulp? Anything?”

“Wine,” came Risa’s muffled voice. “Anderson liked to synthesize wine.”

“Good. Then I suggest you all go get yourself some of that. We’ll see you tomorrow. Let us know you’re coming, and we’ll bring chairs.”

“Where are you going?” Kate asked, seeing him stand up. He offered his hand to his sister, who, again, took it with a frightening lack of resistance or even questioning.

“We’re going to get really drunk,” he said with decision, and Cassie said, “Oh, thank God.”

And now, four hours later, Marshall had already come by to collect his wayward wife with hardly a flinch.

“Bad day?” he asked as he came into C.J.’s quarters. He didn’t sound

particularly surprised, but he did raise his eyebrows when Cassie started to sniffle.

“Remember the ice-piss lizards?” she asked, sounding forlorn.

“Yeah, sweetheart. How could I forget the ice-piss lizards?” He took both her hands in his and pulled her up and into his long arms.

“I miss the ice-piss lizards,” Cassie bemoaned, her voice muffled in her husband’s chest. “I really fucking miss the ice-piss lizards. Could we have another shipment of ice-piss lizards, just for me?”

Marshall rubbed her arms and looked over her head to meet C.J.’s gaze helplessly.

“*Really* bad day,” he said softly, and C.J. nodded.

“Don’t watch those recordings alone, Marshall,” he warned. “And don’t make Cass watch them over again. And,” he added before Marshall could even think it, “don’t ask me to do it either.”

Marshall nodded. “I’ll get Michelle. She’ll want to see them, and she has better booze than you.”

“But not today,” Cassie whimpered. “Today I need my alien man, with the big octo-peter.”

C.J.’s eyes bugged. “Oh Jesus, Marshall... make her stop....”

Marshall’s normally nearly albino skin suddenly washed a really vibrant lavender. “It’s... uh... my species has this sort of prong, to, uh, stimulate ovulation... it’s not really, uh, tentacle-y or anything....”

C.J. laughed helplessly into his Scorch, as the locals called it, and waited for Marshall to drag his wife away. She was sobbing on his shoulder by the time they cleared the vacuum seal on the door.

And now it was him, alone, but he didn’t know if he would ever call himself alone again. He listened to the space station whirring around him, heard the noises of people going about their business out in the corridor, and thought of the frenetic round of activity there in the hub of the station. Thought of the three planets within twelve or twenty-four or seventy-two hours away, and of the sturdy ships and the many escape pods that would evacuate the station. It was possible—the worst was always possible—but it was so highly improbable that anything that could destroy all that life would actually spare one unlucky soul to bear the burden of the dead.

Not so with Anderson.

C.J. couldn't help it, he remembered being eye to eye with him that morning, of watching him lick that full lower lip nervously. He thought of the texture of his fair hair between C.J.'s fingers—adult's hair, but fine and smooth. He thought of the edge of Anderson's cheekbones, the depth of his eyes with their rim of dark brown lashes, and the total trust he'd laid down in C.J.'s lap as he slept.

He smelled young, like the human equivalent of baby powder, and his neck was so slender, and his collarbones were prominent and vulnerable. He made C.J. want to wrap his body around all of that tenderness, all of that vulnerability, and protect him and protect him and never let anything hurt him again.

And that made C.J. think of Alpha, and in the haze of alcohol, C.J. couldn't lie, not even to himself. Anderson he wanted to protect, but Alpha? Oh God.... His body had been taut and muscular inside that jumpsuit, and C.J. had felt—how could he not? It had been a slug to the gut, an obscene proposition from an obscene amount of testosterone. And still, it made C.J. hard. It made his cock hard, and it gave him visions of lying, face down, his ass in the air, as that fucker rode him and fucked him and pounded him and....

His eyes were closed, his groin ached, and he reached under the waistband of his spiffy faux-denim pants with the holographic pictures of space ships etched on like graffiti, and grabbed his cock with his hand.

Oh God... it felt so good....

He squeezed through his underwear, the vision behind his eyes of Alpha grabbing him brutally, manhandling him, jerking him off with ruthless efficiency. The vision made him groan, and he set his glass down and reached his hand—still chilled from the ice—under his form-fitting breathable synth-cotton shirt and pinched his nipple and groaned again. He tried pinching it harder, like Alpha would, and his cock jumped in his hand. His cock jumped but his nipple ached, so he tried rubbing it with his thumb instead. He thought of Anderson, with pale, soft hands, doing the same thing, and his nipple started to tingle, and his cock ached even more.

With a groan and a sigh, he dragged his pants and underwear down his hips and propped his feet up on the coffee table, spreading his body to the open air as he grabbed his cock again. He had lube in the bedroom, but he felt too good to move, too good to do anything but stroke it, squeezing at the base and along the shaft and then squeezing his skin around the crown, and slowly, slowly, back down again.

Alpha wouldn't stroke him slowly like that. Oh no, he wouldn't—but

Anderson... Anderson might grin at him, shyly, and stroke him so smooth and so slow that he begged a little and whimpered. Yeah, he'd want Anderson's hand on his cock, but Alpha... he'd want Alpha's cock in his....

C.J. stuck two fingers in his mouth and suckled, imagining Anderson's soft lips around his cock, imagining the whimpering sounds he'd make against C.J.'s swollen purple cockhead as he took it accommodately down his throat.

Oh, God, Anderson... you'd do it, wouldn't you. You'd be so beautiful, sucking my cock, and you'd submit and take it and love it and....

He almost came then but couldn't. Instead, he took his two fingers, trailing spit, out of his mouth and reached around his taut backside, pulling aside a cheek and shoving them both, without prelude, into his tight asshole as he thrust his cock into his hand. He envisioned them, both of them, Alpha fucking his ass, literally bending him over and pounding him from behind at the same time he imagined Anderson on his knees with C.J.'s cock down his throat.

He scissored his fingers and pulled hard and fast on his cock and imagined his body, savaged from behind and worshipped from below until he convulsed, hard, his feet battering the coffee table, even as he groaned and spurted white come over his stomach and chest and even his chin.

The comedown took forever. He panted, still squirming, still aroused, even though his cock was growing limp in his hand. He pulled his fingers from his ass, mostly because they weren't big enough to do what he really wanted, and wiped them off on the inside of his underwear, and then, feeling drunk and aroused and dirty in a good way, brought up his other hand, the one covered in come, and licked off his thumb, and then his finger, and then the back of the hand, and the webbing between his fingers, and his palm.

When he was done, he rubbed his dampened, come-scented hand over his face in desperation. Anderson, Alpha, they were so confused in his head, and when he'd tasted his spend, he'd thought of them both.

With a sigh, he dragged himself up from the couch and into the bathroom. He had a decent water allowance and went for the full water shower this time, spending a few extra credits cranking the heat to practically scalding. He emerged feeling weak and a little hungover, and emotionally naked, only to realize that Anderson had gotten back while he'd been showering, and was sitting on the couch with two bags of clothes next to him, looking....

Beautiful. Beautiful and hopeful and oh so excited.

C.J. swallowed and wrapped a towel around his waist and put on his best,

brightest, most sober smile. “Looks like someone got some clothes,” he said. This man had just survived... God, it had almost killed C.J. to watch it, and Anderson had survived it. The least C.J. could do was be excited for him.

“I’ve... we didn’t have anything like this,” Anderson said, standing up and gesturing to his jeans—a lot like C.J.’s, with different holos etched on. He had a tight-fitting cardigan on, and a slim white undershirt. He looked good. Without the jumpsuit or C.J.’s bulkier clothes, he looked slender but not defenseless.

C.J.’s smile softened a little at the edges and felt more real at the center of it. “You look fantastic,” he said with feeling. “Here, let me go change....” He trailed off—he had to. Anderson kept moving up to him, three steps and he was across the room, where C.J. stood at the washroom entrance.

C.J. blushed. He was used to nudity. His quarters were damned spacious now, but very often workers had to share on the station. He’d spent his first three years sharing quarters this size with two men and two women, and although not everybody had ended up in bed together—one of the men and one of the women were exclusive to each other—everyone else fucked like bunnies when they had the chance. They’d gotten used to undressing and showering and whatever in all stages of undress. There just wasn’t enough room for modesty, but this was different.

For one thing, Anderson had just gotten close enough to close his eyes and scent along the hollow of C.J.’s neck.

For another, C.J. had just jacked off dreaming of that soft, pouty mouth on his prick and of a thick, meaty cock in his ass. He’d jacked off dreaming of *Anderson*, after seeing the man as a vulnerable child, and here he was, an alluring adult coming close—coming *sensually* close, barely grazing C.J.’s tender skin with his nose and lips. He stopped for a moment and opened his mouth, touching a tongue to C.J.’s shoulder near his throat.

“Mmm...,” he said softly. “I’d forgotten the feel of steam, or that skin had a smell. I haven’t smelled a person’s skin since....” Anderson flushed, darkly and hotly, and C.J. could feel the heat radiating through his clothes. “If I’d known how good it smelled, I would have tried harder to add it,” he murmured, and then he took that liberty of tasting C.J.’s lower throat again.

If I’d known.... Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

C.J. took a deep breath and backed up, looking wistfully into Anderson’s dark brown eyes. “Anderson, this, uh... this isn’t really....”

Anderson took two steps back and flushed. “I’m sorry. I... I forget. All the

men I've met... I mean, the ones programmed on the ship, they were programmed to be bisexual. I... I mean, I didn't mean to make a pass when I didn't even know if you liked...."

Oh crap! "No, I like!" C.J. protested. "I told you that! I'm totally bi, and you're *totally* hot, but, uh...." Oh, God, he was blushing all over his body, right down to his cock, which was growing longer and thicker under the towel. "Anderson, you haven't known me for more than a week, and normally that wouldn't be a problem...." He had to grimace. Total honesty—God, it made him sound cheap!

He took a deep breath and started over. "Anderson, you're still in a shitty relationship, and I'm the first guy you've gotten to, uh, smell, since you stopped being locked in a little tiny space with your shitty relationship. I, uh...." He closed his eyes and banished all thoughts of that pouty mouth where it didn't belong but maybe did, to some other part of his brain. "I wouldn't be a very good friend if I let you, uh... explore my skin before you sort of...."

Anderson looked away. "How did you know about Alpha?" he asked, probably his entire body about the same color as C.J.'s at this point.

"For one thing, he sort of laid claim to you today when I was on the ship. For another"—C.J.'s voice grew hard—"we could all see the marks on your neck when you got here."

Anderson raised a slender, pale hand to the throat of his new shirt. "He's not real," he said weakly. "He's not real." It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

C.J. shook his head, got a good grip on the towel around his waist, and took the two steps in to Anderson, this time pulling him in for as platonic a hug as he could possibly manage. "He is to you, baby, and there's not a soul here who isn't going to treat him like he matters. He's real, and he's still hurting you, and until we get rid of that, doing what you're thinking about could only fuck you up."

Anderson shuddered in his arms, leaning against him limply, soft like a child, and all of C.J.'s hot fuck-me thoughts dissipated like shower steam. "That's not going to stop me from fantasizing," Anderson confessed with a weak little giggle, and C.J. had to smile.

"Me neither," he admitted, backing up. "But here, let me go put on something practical and ugly, and then you can keep your hands off the package."

Anderson shook his head. “Put on something pretty and hot and let me dream.”

C.J. should have blown him off. He really should have. But he didn’t. He put on his tight pants and a tight sage-green T-shirt that looked really good with his light green eyes, and a dark brown overshirt that set off his light brown skin, and brushed his coiled, nappy curls into a little crest running down the center of his head, added a light splat of aftershave on his cheeks, and went into the living room to ask Anderson to model his new clothes.

It was a bad idea. A really bad idea. Even if they didn’t have sex this night, it was a horrible, horrible idea.

C.J. told himself over and over again that he was stupid, and this was dangerous, and that Anderson was going to get hurt. The problem was he was pretty sure Anderson could survive almost anything. C.J. was starting to think he wasn’t anywhere nearly as strong.

It didn’t matter. He got back into the living room and fixed them something to eat. It was simple soup from rations, but it was quality and tasty, and Anderson ate it and told him about his day.

“The current pool felt *awesome* right up until I got out and everything felt like all wobbly like....” He poked his soup. “Noodles. These are noodles. I haven’t had anything like this since the rations ran out about two years ago. But my muscles felt like noodles, and my bones felt all hollow. Michelle was great, though, and took me to eat. It was a different place than you took me to. I like it. We can eat there, and I’ll show you.”

C.J. nodded, knowing the kiosk Michelle preferred but willing to let Anderson lead since he was so excited about it. “We can go for dinner tomorrow,” was what he said, and Anderson beamed. C.J.’s heart flipped over, and that terrible, implacable attraction to Alpha became less than a memory.

“So I came back and took a nap, and then Michelle took me shopping.” He flushed. “I spent a lot of your money, but I wanted to go back for more.”

C.J. chuckled. “No worries, Anderson. Money I’ve got. Or, well, Marshall’s got. We can go back tomorrow. Meet up here, go out and eat, hit the shops. Find you something you can wear in the hub and get down to the clubs one of these days. What do you say?”

Anderson looked at him with shining eyes. “Really? The hub? With the rides and the dancing and the... the *people*? It sounds almost as good as an amusement park!”

C.J. laughed outright. “Yeah. We should probably wait a while. You’re getting tired already. We want you to have your strength all built up for dancing, right?”

Instead of smiling back, Anderson narrowed his eyes. “I’m not a child, Cyril.”

Wince. “Oh Christ, where’d you hear my full name?”

“Your sister uses it all the time. So does Michelle. Why do you hate it?”

“Because it sounds like a grown-up, and I still feel your age.”

Anderson looked at him gravely. “But you’re going to be the second in command at the station, C.J. That’s a grown-up job, isn’t it?”

“Oh God.” C.J. shook his head and stood up, taking Anderson’s bowl from him and washing it up in the tiny sink. “That’s it. You have *got* to stop talking to other people.”

“Why do you hate the idea so much?” Anderson asked curiously. C.J. looked up and Anderson was, oh holy shit, taking off his new pants and putting on another pair, this one skin-tight and black and coming up about three inches below Anderson’s navel. Anderson hadn’t groomed or shaved, and the peek of curly pubic hair coming up above the line of the pants themselves sent a little laser bolt of longing right to C.J.’s groin.

He breathed out hard from his nose. “When did you stop wanting to change in the other room?” he asked thinly.

Anderson looked up and his smile was not sweet in the least. “When you came out of the shower.”

Oh. Well, hell. C.J. turned back to the four dishes that he needed to wash with extreme concentration and answered Anderson’s question, trying not to see the long, pale torso that Anderson was revealing as he pulled out more clothes.

C.J. shrugged as he said it, because the answer to that question sounded like such a copout. “Cassie was always so much better at being a leader than I was, you know? I didn’t need to prove myself or do anything spectacular because Cassidy? She wrote the book on being perfect. I figured I’d just write another sort of book, you know?”

Anderson was staring at him. “If that’s true, how’d you end up here?”

“See! That’s exactly it! I had two other jobs planetside, right? Both of them were analyzing space data to improve our interplanetary travel policies, and the thing is? I *rocked* at those jobs. I loved them. I could have done them forever.”

“Why didn’t you?”

C.J. frowned. “Because the dumbest fucking people get put in charge of places like that. I’m not kidding. One guy took a look at my work and said, ‘Well, yes, it would cost us some money to increase trade five hundred percent. Nice work. But we’re going to go another way because I hired my wife’s nephew and he’ll become a bazillionaire if we use a different idea that won’t last three years.’ That company is now out of business by the way. The other guy looked at my work and said, ‘Well, I understand your concerns about product safety. I’ll talk to my engineers.’ Well, I *knew* the guy’s engineers, so I talked to them, and *he* was never planning to talk to them, so when the engineers went on strike because they didn’t want to fucking *die*, guess who got blamed? I’ll give you three guesses, but you only know four people on the station, so I’m betting you can get it in one!”

Anderson laughed as C.J. went off, and C.J. realized that his voice had gotten loud and he’d stopped doing dishes and started talking with his hands. He put his hands deliberately on the counter and sighed. “I just didn’t want to be the guy in charge because the guy in charge always seemed like an asshole, and I didn’t want to be that guy.”

Anderson’s face suddenly went very still. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I can see how it would suck to be the guy in charge.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. “Shit,” C.J. said succinctly. “Yeah, Anderson, let’s cut the crap, okay? I know you’ve been making decisions and hard decisions and harder decisions since you were... Christ. How old were you again?”

“Twelve,” Anderson said, his mouth twisting a little in response to C.J.’s no-nonsense tone. “I was twelve.”

“Yeah,” C.J. sighed. “You were a baby. Hell, Chips was older than that when I got him, okay?”

In the corner, Chips said, “*C.J. stop fucking around!*”

C.J. rolled his eyes. “The thing is....” For a moment C.J. floundered for his words. “The thing is, were you the kind of person who would have wanted to do that at the beginning, or did you have to really fuck yourself up to become that person?”

To his surprise and relief, Anderson burst out laughing. “My vote is on fucked myself up, you think?”

C.J. nodded and laughed a little himself. Then he sobered, and he allowed

himself to look at Anderson in the new outfit. He looked... God. Hot. Sweet. Spicy. Beautiful. His appreciation must have showed in his eyes, because Anderson blushed and ducked his head.

“You like?” he asked, doing that thing again where he looked at C.J. from under his lowered lashes. C.J. couldn’t help himself. He did the same thing.

“Yeah, I like,” he said softly. “I like a whole lot.”

Anderson’s smile widened, and he tilted his chin back so that he was looking at C.J. straight on, and C.J. was the one pulling back. “Good. It’s good to be liked.

C.J. didn’t resist the shiver of awareness and desire that raced through his bloodstream. He’d acknowledged it, right? He’d beat off to it, right? So it was there, and he knew about it, and if he knew about it, he could control it, right?

He looked at Anderson again, whose expression had gone faintly predatory as he started to strip off his new holo-decorated jeans to the plain white cotton briefs beneath. He saw C.J. watching, and C.J. cursed himself, especially when that predatory grin widened and Anderson reached unselfconsciously into his bag of purchases. What had happened to the kid who had run into C.J.’s room to change? C.J. didn’t know, but he almost wanted *that* Anderson back.

“So, Mr. I-don’t-like-authority, how do you like me now?” Anderson stood there in his underwear alone, looking at C.J. over his shoulder with such wicked humor that C.J. was completely sucked in.

C.J. tightened his stomach like he was fighting off a punch to the gut and shook his head, backing up. “Better with clothes on, my man, better with clothes.”

Anderson obeyed and tried on his next purchase, but his laugh was low and a little dirty, and C.J. wanted to know which hologram had taught him bad-boy, because he had that down pat.

That night, C.J. skipped the part where Anderson went to sleep on the couch and put the kid in his bed instead. Cliché? Yes. But necessary too. Anderson hadn’t gotten enough sleep the night before, and C.J. was tired of sleeping sitting up on the couch. This way would cut out the middleman, and C.J. hoped it would make him more aware than ever of his role as Anderson’s caretaker.

It helped that Anderson wanted to talk as they drifted off. He asked C.J. questions about his friends.

“How was Bobby today? And Kate? Do they miss me?”

“Very much,” C.J. told him truthfully. “We can take you to visit tomorrow, after you go work out with Michelle. How’s that?”

Anderson made a satisfied sound, and C.J. smiled, feeling warm and fuzzy as they sank into the bed. “That’s great. Thanks, C.J.”

“It’s not just me,” C.J. felt compelled to protest. “We all want you to be happy, Anderson. I mean... you just lived through something huge. The fact that you’re not a raving maniac sort of speaks well of the whole damned human race, you know? People want to reward that. They’re sort of hoping that all of that good human-ness will rub off on *them*.”

Anderson was tired. He’d stumbled into his night clothes—he was still wearing C.J.’s old shorts and a T-shirt for that—and practically fallen into bed, but suddenly his shoulders twitched, and he pushed himself upright in agitation.

“I’m nothing to admire, C.J.,” he said unhappily. “I’m... I’m so flawed. I... you can’t let them think I’m good, you understand? I did bad things on that trip. I...”

C.J. knew what he was talking about. “I met him, Anderson,” C.J. said softly. “I’ve met him. Don’t worry. Don’t worry. The world doesn’t have to know about Alpha.”

“I don’t even want to know about Alpha,” Anderson murmured, and C.J. was glad when Anderson’s shoulders relaxed after that and he could hear the even breathing of sleep through the quiet room.

ANDERSON popped him in the cheek with his elbow as he sat up in bed for his horrible, soundless scream, so C.J. ended up going to work with a shiner.

The worst part was trying to explain to Cassidy how it had happened and enduring her censuring look of pity.

“God, Cyril, you’ve got no sense at all, do you know that? He’s not a gamma bird. You’re going to have to give him back, you know that, right?”

“I know he’s not a gamma bird, dammit!” C.J. snapped. “Look, can we just go in and watch his life some more? Because, you know, I can’t get enough of seeing absolute fucking misery, okay? God knows seeing him sit up in bed and scream isn’t enough fun in person that I have to relive it a thousand times via holographic 3D photography!”

Cassie surprised him then. Without another sharp word, she threw herself into his arms for a sisterly embrace that had none of the awkwardness of their initial cling-together the day before. “You’re going to get hurt, C.J.,” she whispered. “He’s living in your quarters, sleeping in your bed, and you’re seeing him suffer every day. You’re going to want to help him, and he... he might be too damaged to help. Baby, send him to Michelle’s quarters, ship him downside... look at you. You’ve got a black eye, and you don’t look like you’ve slept in three days. Please, Cyril? Please?”

C.J. shook his head and gave her shoulders a squeeze and then stepped back. “I’ll be fine, Cass,” he said at last, not looking at her. “You know me, I never take things too seriously. We’ll wrap this up, get Julio in here to break down the holo-science, and I’ll ask him if he wants to go stay at Jensen’s clinic for a while. He’ll like it there, and Jensen’s dying to get a crack inside his cranium, I can tell.”

“Oh, God, C.J., you’re... you’re already attached.”

C.J. shrugged. “Naw, I’m too superficial to get attached. Ask Jensen. He’ll tell you.”

Cassie sighed. “Yeah, if he was smart, he’d tell me you broke his heart before he had a chance to break yours.”

Wince. “That wasn’t quite his version of events.”

“That’s because for all his so-called brilliance in the field, he never got my little brother like I do. Let’s go in, Cyril. I can’t listen to you lie to yourself anymore, and we need to get a move on.”

They went in and watched Anderson program Kate. They kept the vids in real time and hit record to send the info to Julio and listened to Kate’s caustic commentary behind them.

“Really, Anderson? You couldn’t have given me the delicate features of a supermodel and some knowledge of how to give myself a manicure? Jesus, I could have done a better job myself!”

C.J. was about to make a sarcastic remark, but he looked behind him and saw two things. One was that Kate had perfectly manicured nails with a demure coat of pink glitter paint on them, which was so out of keeping with what he was seeing on the screen as her programming that he realized she must have done that herself—right down to learning how, since all of the holograms were programmed to synthesize human behavior right down to an algorithm that sent them to the bathroom every so many hours. The other was that Bobby was

looking at her fondly.

“If he’d given you all that, I might not have fallen in love with you,” Bobby said simply, and Kate’s disgruntled look eased.

“Well,” she sniffed, “maybe I can forgive him for that.”

C.J.’s head hurt with the possibilities of holograms falling in love whether or not they were programmed for it, and he focused on the very young Anderson on the screen with something akin to desperation.

Kate came into being and then argued with Anderson for every step of Bobby’s programming. Anderson won most of the battles, which made C.J.’s head hurt even more, and then a snippet of conversation caught his attention.

“Okay, Kate, it says here ‘standard orientation’. What in the hell does that mean?”

Kate shrugged. “Hells if I know, Anderson. It’s *my* programming. Everything about me feels standard.”

“Oh shit,” Cassie muttered next to him, and C.J. cringed.

He looked behind him and said, “So he programmed all of you to standard orientation?” God, liking men would totally blow if you’d programmed all of your companions to be straight.

“Not me,” Henry said with a playful eyebrow waggle. “I’m programmed bisexual.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, rolling her eyes. “That’s because Bobby and I programmed all of the potential companions. Anderson didn’t have anything to do with you guys.”

Cassie shook her head. “I still can’t believe he let the holograms program the holograms. That is some weird bullshit—no offense, Kate, it just is!”

Bobby shrugged and met eyes with his wife. “You sort of have to keep watching. There was a... well, kind of a progression....”

Kate blanched. “Uh, yeah. By the way? Don’t expect to see a lot of us after the health and hygiene files are opened, okay? I think I’m too human to hang out here for long after that.”

Bobby leered. “Oh glory, *I’m* not!”

C.J.’s head gave a terrible throb, and he turned his attention resolutely back to the screen. Watch the holo-programming now. Watch it—what, Anderson was fourteen here? They had two years to wade through, two years of spectacular

holo-science breakthroughs before the H and H files were opened. Concentrate on that. At this rate, it would take what? A week? He had a week. A week to grow accustomed to the way his body responded to both Anderson and Alpha. A week to reconfigure his attachment to Anderson into something completely platonic. A week to remember that Anderson needed a friend, not a flighty, flaky lover.

It was a strange situation. He just needed to grow accustomed to it, that was all. Right?

Yeah. Absolutely. Right.

Chapter 11

Health and Hygiene

C.J. COULD only be grateful that Anderson had spent such an enormous amount of time building his world in little bricks of air and electric current. It gave C.J. and Cass time to recuperate. They watched Bobby come online, funny, irrepressible Bobby, and then watched the dynamic form, Kate giving the orders, the boys grumbling or circumventing but never outright defying.

“Why don’t you just tell her you’re the boss?” Bobby asked once, and Anderson’s dignified response haunted C.J. for weeks.

“That would be cheating,” he said, and it became the watchword between the three of them for out-and-out reprogramming someone or something that didn’t agree with any of them.

“Not cheating” was very important to Anderson.

“I don’t understand,” Cassie said one afternoon, holding an iced glass of Scorch to her forehead. They avoided the temptation to call too many days short for a medicinal belt of anything strong, but when they did, there was usually a *very* good reason for it. In this case, they had just seen Anderson’s halting, embarrassed explanation to the hologram they’d programmed as their teacher that everyone in the room was a hologram, and he, Anderson, had created them.

“What should he have done?” C.J. asked, downing his belt of Scorch. It had been painful, and even worse had been the way he’d wept on Kate, like a little brother might on an older sister, for a good hour after school had ended.

“Well, Anderson, it’s not like it’s going to change the way they act around you, is it?” Kate had asked practically, and Anderson nodded.

“Sometimes I wish it would,” he muttered. “I really need some help with this fuel ratio thing, and everyone wants to design amusement parks instead.”

“God,” Cassie had snarled, making note of the personnel issues and the way Anderson dealt with them and then sending the notes to Julio and Jensen. They had both remarked upon the weirdness of reporting to a top-notch holo-engineer and a top-flight shrink. Cassie said it was just plain odd, but C.J. thought that the overlap had been bound to happen eventually. Julio came in

after they left to look at the sections of recording they'd highlighted or the places on the bridge where the programming resided, and to ask the holograms questions. After that first day, both Cassie and C.J., and even Jensen, had agreed that the smaller the audience for Anderson's personal life on display, the better.

Cassie and C.J. were it. No one else got to gawk at the boy who had talked to dolls for over eight years.

Today, Cassie, who used to organize her dolls by hair color, wardrobe specifications, and appropriate matching stuffed animals, was having a hard time understanding how Anderson could have had all that power at his disposal and then refused to use it on the grounds that it was cheating.

"He should have changed it!" Cassie bemoaned. "It was his world! If it's your world, you get to set the rules, don't you? Why wouldn't he set the rules? I mean... there he was! Mini-God! Why wouldn't he just take charge?"

C.J. sighed and thought about Anderson shooting him those predatory, playful looks, terrified that C.J. wouldn't respond. "Don't you get it?" he said after another swallow of Scorch. "Don't you get it? It was his world. Think about it, Cass. When you were twelve years old, you reported a teacher for not giving enough homework!"

"I liked my boundaries!" Cassie hiccupped. God, she was a funny drunk. Watching Anderson grow up in psychotropic wonderland may have been bloody damned hard on both of them, but seeing Cass as moderately human was an unexpected benny on the side.

"I know you did." C.J. smiled. "You liked them so much, you had to make them *my* boundaries."

"You *needed* boundaries, Cyril!" Cassie said, pointing her finger past her liquor glass. "If you hadn't had boundaries, you would have fucking lost your little baby mind!"

"Yeah," C.J. agreed. "Yes, I would have. I would have lost my little baby mind. But not Anderson."

Cassie took a hard swallow and drained the glass before she dumped it all over herself. "Whaddya mean?"

C.J. sighed. "I mean, when you're twelve years old, everyone's telling you what to do. There're all sorts of fucking rules. Get up, go to sleep, study this, study that, don't talk to strangers, don't stare at the sun, you can't work off-world until you're twenty-three—"

“Didn’t stop you from running away from home and hiding aboard a shuttle when you were sixteen!” Cassie accused, and C.J. flinched.

“Well, see, that just proves my point! I had all those rules, so I got to question them. I got to ask why this and not that, and why couldn’t we change A if it screwed up B—”

“God, you were a pain in the ass!”

“Well yeah, to *you*. But see, that’s the point! Anderson liked the rules, just like you did. He had a daily routine within four sleep cycles. Now I read those letters. *You* read those letters. He was hell with a shit-eating smile and a bucket of worms when he was twelve. But the minute the rules were all gone, what’s the first thing he did?”

Cassie blinked stupidly. “Made the rules.”

C.J. nodded. He hadn’t discussed this with Jensen, but then he didn’t have to. He’d lived with the guy for two years. He’d gone to enough mental health seminars to qualify him for *something* if he ever got out of space engineering.

“He made the rules. He programmed the holograms and made the fucking rules, Cassie. That was it. That was his world. Say you want the sky to be red one day instead of blue. You know you can make it happen, you’ve got the technology, you’ve got the means, and dammit, you fucking want a red sky. Or a pink sky with a velvet ribbon. Or a cat’s eye looking through the sun. And you can *fucking do it!* Would you?”

Cassie turned sad, sober eyes to him. “No,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t fucking do it. I wouldn’t make the sky pink or the sun green. Because that would violate the rules.”

“And what do you call it when you violate the rules and no one gets caught, oh sister mine?”

“Cheating.”

C.J. nodded and poured another dollop into his glass and then one into Cassie’s. “Cheating. And the one thing our boy doesn’t do, is cheat.”

THEY finished off C.J.’s Scorch that day, but that turned out to be a good thing. It seemed that Cassie’s husband had some *much* better liquor inside his stores, and the week they watched as Anderson discovered his own body and *then* the adult-level health and hygiene files, complete with enrichment materials, the two of

them did some serious damage to Marshall's selection.

The trouble, C.J. knew, as he watched that first interrupted session of masturbation, was that he had to go home and *face* Anderson after this.

And not just *face* him, sleep in the same bed, comfort him after his dreams, and... God. That wasn't even the worst part. C.J. saw so much of him as a young man, even watching him discover his sexuality might have been able to be viewed impersonally, through the eyes of an engineer, if all C.J. did with Anderson was *comfort* him.

But that wasn't all they did.

They ate dinner together, they watched comedy and romance vids, they talked about their favorite parts. They went shopping, they went out with C.J.'s friends and watched movies from planetside at the station's small theater. They made plans to go to the hub to visit clubs when Anderson felt more comfortable with more people. The progression from watching the recording of Anderson to dealing with the living, seemingly recovered Anderson—Jesus, it was such a mindfuck.

That first day they had to deal with Anderson's budding sexuality, C.J. thought he could handle it, and then Bobby walked into the room on the screen, and C.J. said, "Uh-oh," right when Cassie said, "What?"

As the scene played out, C.J.'s first uncomfortable stirrings of arousal were drowned out by the horrible knowledge that Anderson's innocence had pretty much condemned him to be on a shuttle full of people not one of whom would make a decent companion. As Bobby left, Anderson's wistful expression lingered, and behind them, from the holograms who watched quietly with wide eyes, Bobby said, "Oh God. Jesus, I felt so bad."

C.J. turned to him then and did what his sister probably thought was insane, but he didn't care. "It's not your fault," he said quietly. "It's not your fault when someone loves you and you don't love them the same way. It just is. It's one of the ways we hurt each other without even trying."

Then he turned around and watched as Anderson proceeded to discover sex, and even without Anderson knowing that there would ever be a C.J. to witness his adolescent gropings, just watching it hurt C.J. without even trying.

God, it hurt to watch him discover sex on his own, to watch him fumble, embarrassed, excited, joyous, and always, at the end, ashamed of his own climax. It hurt to watch him hide it from his friend because he knew Bobby didn't return his feelings, and to pretend he didn't see the inevitable romance

between the two people he loved the most.

“You know,” Cassie burred, stoned on some of Marshall’s finest Hermes-Gamma grain-fruit wine, “I never saw that coming. They looked at each other one minute, and the next minute, they were fucking like lemmings, and they were *good* at it.”

“Of course they were good at it,” C.J. mumbled, for once the drunker of the two of them. “They’d just ingested enough porn for forty people. They were like a walking repository for sexual positions and know-how. Are,” he corrected at the last. “*Are* a walking repository for sex.”

That last had to be added. Bobby and Kate might have stayed out of the room for that part, but they must have been listening to it, because after Cassie left for the day, C.J. stuck his head inside the little house construct—which had remained up permanently since the ship had docked—in order to tell them that he and Cassie were logging out early, and he could hear the sounds of passionate, happy sex going on from what he presumed to be their room. His eyes had grown wide, and he’d been almost amused out of his funk for a moment when suddenly the door to Anderson’s room swung open, and there stood Alpha.

He was naked and had his erect member in his fist.

It was as large as C.J. had imagined, as long and as thick, with a truly monstrously sized head, and C.J. was, for once in his life, speechless.

Alpha had eyed him with lazy, hooded contempt and proceeded to spit on his hand very deliberately and then lower it to that gigantic cock and stroke, slowly. C.J. watched him with his own erection struggling gamely inside his undershorts.

Alpha leaned back against the doorframe of the bedroom then, and while the front door of the house closed quietly behind C.J., continued to stroke his uncircumcised cock, the foreskin making wet, blatantly carnal sounds as it slipped sloppily around the crown.

“I know this turns you on,” Alpha hissed, and C.J. grunted, hating himself at the same time he *really* wanted to relieve himself, and Alpha grinned at him in triumph. With a few rough strokes and a solid pinch of his nipple, Alpha came, his semen erupting in a fractured arc to splatter on the floorboards.

The sound was enough to snap C.J. out of whatever spell had been holding him. “Lots of things turn me on,” he said quietly. “I know which ones are bad for me.”

He'd gotten *way* drunker than Cassie that day—the last time they did that for a while—but by now, they'd stopped explaining to each other why.

Hell, she knew.

Five days later, they watched as Kate and Bobby started programming companions. The first one had made C.J. and Cassie laugh themselves silly, and while Kate and Bobby had apologized—both to C.J. and Cassie in their time and to Anderson on the image they were watching—the second attempt hadn't been much better. The third companion attempt had to be canceled before the true importance of what Anderson had to do with the misfires really hit the two of them.

“How could you guys screw that up so bad?” Cassie asked Bobby and Kate, and they both blushed. Cassie had long since stopped treating them like artificial people, but that meant they were in a position to be victimized by her customary bluntness.

“Hey,” Kate protested, “Peter was *not* our fault. He was handsome, according to our data of what Anderson preferred, he was serious, he was smart. In fact, he was very close to Henry here, except Henry has a sense of humor, and...” Kate blushed. “And we gave Henry some of my qualities as well.”

Cassie looked seriously intrigued. “So was Henry the first attempt you made with your personality traits?”

Kate and Bobby nodded. “It was stupid—we were looking at things from a strictly male-female perspective. It didn't even occur to us that Anderson would find the qualities he'd put into a female attractive in a male.”

Cassie laughed hard, her shoulders shaking, her breath coming short, and Bobby and Kate cringed. “Really? That's one of the most sexist things I've ever heard!”

“Well, deprogram me!” Bobby snapped. “I was sixteen!”

Cassie sobered and became instantly contrite. “I'm sorry. I do forget how young you all were.” C.J. felt her glance at him while he brooded at the screen in front of him. Anderson had just walked into the room and mumbled dully that Peter would have to be cancelled the next day. Kate and Bobby seemed to take it in stride, but Anderson....

Anderson was near tears.

C.J. looked up at Kate, Bobby, Henry, and Risa. “Was he like this with all of them?” he asked quietly.

Henry shrugged. "Well, they only made one more prototype. That was me. He liked me for a friend, so I got to stay."

C.J. shook his head. "I mean, you know, the school, the students, the teacher, it all had to go. Did doing that bother him as much then as cancelling the prototypes is bothering him now?"

"Worse," Risa said softly. They all looked at her, and she shrugged defensively. "We all saw it. We're not holograms to him, sir." She, of all of them, had the worst problem calling C.J. and Cassidy by their first names. "They're not. They're people. He wasn't a scientist cancelling a program. He was a...." Risa trailed off and wiped her cheeks, but C.J. didn't need her to finish.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I know what he was."

They watched Kate and Bobby program Henry next, and this time, it was their dialogue that needed to be sent down to Jensen and Julio.

"Okay, we need him to look like that one vid guy, the one from the m/m porn vid," Kate was muttering.

On the deck of the ship, Henry looked at her, surprised.

"Is *that* where I got my looks?" he asked, faintly appalled.

Kate didn't even blush. "Hell yes. That vid *totally* turned Anderson on. Look at the split screen!" They all automatically looked to what was going on in the other parts of the ship at that time, and sure enough, there was Anderson, naked on his cot with his knees in the air and his cock in his hand.

C.J. gave a strangled laugh and wondered if he had enough water in his shower account to take another hot shower that night. Now that Anderson was sleeping in the same bed, it was his one safe place to one-off.

"What's his personality going to be like?" Bobby asked, and Kate sighed.

"Well, he needs a sense of humor, because Peter was a complete tool. Nice job thinking he needed someone serious like himself, dickhead."

Bobby shrugged. "Well, he's been awfully quiet lately."

In the other part of the ship, Anderson was biting his palm and screaming as he came, and C.J. heard Cassie snicker next to him. He was too hard and too heartsore to think it was quite that funny.

"Yeah, but he had a major crush on you because he liked the way you play. We need someone like that. Someone with your dumbass sense of humor, and a little bit of seriousness, you know, so Anderson knows he's got a partner to be

serious with.”

“We’ll need glasses,” Bobby said with confidence. “They always make someone look serious.”

“Thanks a lot, dickhead,” Henry said in disgust. “I couldn’t even program laser surgery because Anderson thought that would be cheating.”

Cassie and C.J. met eyes, and both of them suppressed a groan. God. They’d promised each other no more drinking after the last time. They’d keep that down to once a week, otherwise they’d both need a treatment program during their down-planet break, but *jeez!* The idea of the different pieces of Anderson’s identity arguing with each other about their programming was... was baffling. Baffling and difficult and... horrible.

Glumly, C.J. wished he’d stayed with Jensen long enough to get the big psych degree alongside him, just so he could help Anderson now.

Anderson—God, *Anderson*. Anderson, whose life they were watching and who was, even as C.J. and Cass wrapped it up that day, waiting in “their” quarters and feeding the gamma bird. Today, he was wearing a new outfit with a skin-tight white bodysuit and a thin-collared, bright green shirt belted over it. Whoever he had been as a child, he certainly enjoyed wearing bright, exciting things now.

“Hey, C.J., tough day?”

C.J. laughed helplessly. Anderson knew C.J. was reviewing recorded segments of his life. C.J. had been honest with him about it but hadn’t told him how hard it was to watch, how horrible it was to see Anderson finding more and more ingenious ways to hide his terrible, chest-crushing loneliness from even himself.

So Anderson knew what C.J. was doing, but he didn’t really *know*. At least, C.J. thought he didn’t, until Anderson looked up from giving Chips a piece of Hermes-Eight hybrid-grain flatbread and said, “So, have you gotten to the health and hygiene file yet?”

C.J.’s entire body flushed hot. “About five days ago. We, uhm, had to slow down because you and your friends were doing a lot of programming right there.”

Anderson sent him that flirty, predatory look again, the one he had when he was thinking about C.J. sexually and wanted C.J. to know. Today, after watching Anderson pleasure himself for the umpteenth time, it actually made C.J. sweat. “So you’ve been watching me masturbate like it’s a new sport and I’m going for

a gold medal?”

C.J. laughed a little and rubbed his hand over his tight, flattened gold curls. “It’s an old sport, little man, but yeah, you were trying to set a record.”

Anderson’s look intensified, and he smiled a one-sided, evil little imp of a smile. “Yeah, well, you keep using shower credits and you might have me beat.”

C.J. put his face in his hands and groaned. “God... Anderson... you weren’t supposed to know....”

“That I’ve been turning you on these last two weeks?” Anderson swung around and moved closer, right into C.J.’s space. “After your nice speech about it all being a bad idea, right?” He was so close C.J. could look between his fingers and see the brown in Anderson’s eyes and the way they narrowed in the corners when he was trying to bait C.J.

“Anderson, I think you maybe need to....” He was going to say it. He was going to say, “You need to move into other quarters.” He *was*. But Anderson’s lip started to quiver, and his mouth parted, and his forehead wrinkled in hurt, and C.J. remembered that every night he sat up and screamed silently, afraid that once again, no one would hear him.

“I need to what?” Anderson asked, nothing predatory in his eyes or the set of his shoulders now. Just simple need. Simple, “By all that’s holy in the universe, C.J., please don’t leave me!” need.

“Need to let me go use the fresher, at least,” C.J. said roughly, setting his hands on Anderson’s shoulders and moving him firmly away.

Anderson’s smile was winsome and conciliatory. “I, uhm, asked Marshall, you know. I have shower credits too now. You can use some of mine. I’m not used to all that water yet.”

C.J. nodded. “Thanks, Anderson. I’ll try to keep it short.”

Anderson swallowed and backed up another step. “I’m really grateful, C.J., for your help and your friendship. I shouldn’t bait you like that.”

C.J. closed his eyes and remembered Alpha, leaning against the doorframe and stroking his cock without even a blush.

It was like Alpha was the want and Anderson was the apology. Alpha was the id and Anderson was the superego, and C.J. was the poor schmuck getting fucked and blown between them.

“Thanks, Anderson,” C.J. said, sincerely. “I’ll... I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time!” Anderson said, smiling that winsome smile again.

C.J. ran to his room, collected his clothes, and dodged into the washroom again. He was about two minutes into soaping his chest and his neck, trying to sponge away some of the confusion, when he felt a brief gust of cooler air into the bathroom. The shower-fresher door opened, and Anderson's hand appeared.

"I bought this for you. You'll like the smell."

C.J. took the soap from him dumbly. The hand disappeared, and C.J. held the soap up to his nose and took an experimental sniff and then leaned his head against the shower cubicle helplessly as his cock stiffened in reaction.

He groaned softly and slathered a little bit of the soap onto his member, shivering as it slicked on the head. *Jesus... oh, holy God!* The smell... it was like Anderson had spent all of his free time that morning trying to find the thing, the perfect smell, the combination of vanilla and spice and hot come that would make C.J. want to pump himself until he was raw.

This time when he closed his eyes, he didn't see Alpha, and he didn't see young Anderson, holding his own cock in his hand.

He saw Anderson, as he had been in the living room, looking predatory and sexy and hot.

He didn't last long after that, which was good, because he was limp and relaxed and clean before he came anywhere near exhausting Anderson's hot water credits. Which meant, of course, he had more to last him, because oh, God and holy shit, was he going to need them!

They stayed inside and watched a vid after dinner, and C.J. was tired enough not to protest when Anderson snuggled himself up under C.J.'s arm and onto his lap.

C.J. didn't relax after that, because he knew what was coming and he was ready. Soon enough they'd fall asleep and Anderson would wake up again in the throes of his nightly ritual, and the echoes of the terrible, strangled, silent screams would stay with C.J. through the rest of his sleep, through his workout routine in the morning, and right up until he walked up the now-familiar ramp to the shuttle where Anderson had lived for more than ten years of his life.

After nearly a month of working there, C.J. already hated it. He didn't know how Anderson had survived.

Two days after C.J. allowed himself to be scented like Anderson's sexual fantasy, Kate and Bobby finally unleashed Alpha on an unsuspecting Anderson, and C.J. was plunged into a hell so exquisite there wasn't a name for it.

And Anderson brought home cologne for C.J. that matched the soap.

Chapter 12

Sex and Violence

“He’s really handsome,” Cassie said at C.J.’s side, and C.J. had to agree.

“Nice job there, guys,” he said to Kate and Bobby, but they looked back at him with hard, unhappy eyes.

“You both know this doesn’t end well,” Kate muttered, and C.J. turned away from where the handsome, confident hologram had just introduced himself to Anderson and Bobby’s class, and looked at her.

“We’ve been watching the replay, Kate,” he said softly. “You guys only had the best of intentions. You wanted him to be happy, and you used what you had to do it. I mean... he was lonely. He was terribly lonely. It wasn’t your fault, and you—”

“We wanted to make it better,” Bobby muttered. “Henry didn’t do it. We had to try something different. We thought he needed some bossiness, someone to take charge after all, you know?”

“I know,” C.J. murmured. He and Cassie had seen it. Leadership weighed heavily on Anderson’s shoulders. Cancelling the companion prototypes, cancelling Kate’s classroom—those decisions hadn’t come easily. Anderson had set up a world and established rules: the holograms *were* people. If they weren’t people, he was alone. If he was alone, he was insane. The rules had to be held to. So if the rules were adhered to, cancelling the programs wasn’t just pushing a button. It was....

No one had said the word. No one wanted to even put a voice to it. The word was too horrible, and Anderson too innocent.

But Anderson knew. He knew that according to the rules, cancelling holograms made him....

Not even Cassie could say it, and there had been a time when C.J. thought she could say anything, no matter how painful, for someone’s own good.

So for a moment, when C.J. and Cassie saw Alpha, they felt their spirits lift. For a moment, it felt like Anderson wasn’t alone anymore.

They had fast-forwarded through much of the dialogue with the previous candidates (although they let Henry have his say, because, well, it only seemed polite since he was in the room), but with Alpha....

With Alpha, everything seemed relevant.

“Notice that?” Cassidy said softly as Alpha introduced himself.

“What?”

“He blew off his name. He spotted the acronym and went for it.” She turned to Bobby and Kate. “Did you guys do that on purpose? The acronym?”

Kate shook her head. “Dumbfuck chance,” she said, so matter-of-fact that they didn’t doubt her in the least.

“Yeah,” C.J. muttered. “He wants to be the shit, the bomb, *the* alpha male.” They watched as Alpha cornered Anderson after school and smoothly insinuated himself into Anderson’s evening ritual of dinner and doing homework with his friends, and C.J. looked at Kate sharply.

“You’re bossy, sweetheart, but you don’t seem *that* aggressive. Where’s he getting this?”

Henry was the one who spoke up. “Risa, actually. She pointed out that since we all seemed to be some part of Anderson himself, the one thing any of us was missing was his ability to give orders, to lead. So she said Bobby and Kate should have gone through with Kate’s instincts and made him the one of us who leads.”

“Yeah,” Cassie muttered with some rancor and a massage to her healed shoulder. “I don’t see him leading now! Where is that cowardly motherfucker?”

“He thinks his job is done,” Kate said dully, which didn’t surprise C.J., but it did surprise Cassie.

“What? Anderson’s here now, so he doesn’t have a function?”

“Well, yeah,” Kate replied. “He assumed, in fact, he had us *all* convinced, that you’d cancel us as soon as we came into dock. He was looking forward to it. He was... I mean, it was like....”

“Like he’d fulfilled his mission,” Henry filled in for her. “I mean, the rest of us, we sort of enjoyed life. It was hard, especially when things got thin, but none of us want to, you know... stop existing. But not Alpha.”

C.J. thought about it for a moment, watching the screen as Alpha’s eyes narrowed in a way that was familiar, but not in that narrow face with the wide-

spaced gray eyes. He was predatory, single-minded. He had one goal and he was going to succeed.

At the moment, as they watched, the goal was to seduce Anderson.

C.J. watched their first kiss on the screen in the front of the bridge console with slightly parted lips and an aching heart. It looked so innocent—it did. Alpha looked confident and happy, and Anderson... he looked... he looked like he *wanted* to be happy. He looked like he *expected* to be happy. But the kiss broke off, and C.J. saw it, a hesitation between the kiss and the expression a lover *should* have after his first kiss.

He knows, C.J. thought. *He knows this isn't real. He's aware.* C.J. remembered Anderson's wonder at the heat from his skin, the smell, the tongue darting out to taste. He wondered if Alpha had these things. *If I'd known... I would have added it.* He heard Anderson's voice in his head and knew the answer. The touch—that touch—broke Anderson's illusion. But changing the program was cheating. The illusion was all he had.

They watched the entire progression that day, from Alpha's introduction to the first kiss to making love—and every step of it hurt C.J. more.

The love scene was... perfect. Alpha was assured, dominant, and there was no fumbling, no uncertainty. He undressed Anderson slowly, kissed every smooth stroke of the soft skin underneath the ugly orange jumpsuit. Anderson came into view—very much like the Anderson that C.J. knew, the one who had started to undress with no self-consciousness at all in C.J.'s room. He was too thin, and his bones—ribs, clavicles, spine, shoulders—were all prominent with youth. His eyes were enormous, lovely, and he used that look—that alluring way of looking with his eyes but tilting his chin away—to inflame Alpha, to make his hands shake and his kisses tremble.

Alpha fell on his knees before Anderson, opened his mouth, and very skillfully sucked Anderson's cock. C.J. couldn't help it—he noticed. Anderson's cock was decently sized, large enough to be interesting in its own right, not so large as to be frightening or distracting or terribly uncomfortable in the right places. Anderson rested his hands on the back of Alpha's head, tilted his head back, and....

“Did you see that?” Cassie asked, her voice tense. Well, yeah—she was probably just as aroused/uncomfortable as C.J. at this point.

“Yeah,” C.J. muttered. “I saw it.”

“His eyes....”

Anderson wasn't closing his eyes. They were hooded. Anderson's cock was hard in Alpha's grip, Anderson's heart was beating fast in his throat, and his nipples were hard, and all signs pointed to arousal. Except, as Alpha crouched on his knees and worshipped Anderson's body with his mouth, Anderson was looking down at Alpha's head with what amounted to detachment. And sorrow. And shame.

"He knows," C.J. said gruffly. Alpha had snuck two slickened fingers to probe Anderson's backside, and Anderson *had* to close his eyes now as he spread his legs and allowed the penetration—welcomed it, from the looks of things—and grew close to climax. But that look, that look of sorrow, it was indelible, and neither of the people watching the screen would forget it. They would see it again in a few moments as Anderson unknowingly faced the programmed holocamera and allowed his anal orifice to be breached by the Alpha construct, even as he grabbed sheets and blankets in clenching fingers and gibbered into a pillow in passion and sexual arousal. They saw it when he reached back and stroked his own cock so he could come, and they saw it again when Alpha shouted and spasmed and shuddered and came.

Anderson turned his face over his shoulder and kissed his new lover, closing his eyes and seemingly becoming lost in the passion, but C.J. and Cassandra—and the other holograms, who were still watching—they all knew.

Anderson had never forgotten, not once, that he was being fucked by an illusion. No matter how deep the passion, no matter how intense the climax, he had known, the entire time, that Alpha was not truly there.

THEY watched the passionate, happy, strangely vacant sex for much of the rest of the day. Cassie started fast-forwarding through those scenes, but it didn't matter. C.J. started to identify the hitch in her breathing that happened when Anderson let the illusion slip, and his reluctant audience knew that he was aware that he was truly alone. C.J.'s hands were shaking by the end of the day, and by the end of the last scene, Cassie was crying. She just hadn't stopped.

The holograms had gone into the house quietly after the first time Anderson and Alpha had intercourse on the screen, and C.J. saw the power fluctuations that meant they were using some of the other parts of the holodeck program. Julio said that, now that they had power and memory to burn, they'd started reconstructing some of the programs they'd had to delete over the years.

In fact, Julio had gotten to be there for some of that, and he'd told C.J. that the new information just kept rolling in. Privately, C.J. hoped they were at an amusement park, going on the roller coaster again and again and again, and he fervently wished he could go with them.

And, like thinking about him conjured him up, Julio was walking up the ramp to the shuttle as C.J. and Cassidy were walking down.

"Give them a break tonight, Jules," C.J. said quietly. "They had sort of a reminder of who and what they are. Maybe let them pretend for a while that they're just like the rest of us."

Julio blinked. "Yeah, sure," he said quietly and then, with a half-laugh, added, "You know, I sort of forget myself, most of the time."

C.J. nodded. So did he. Most of the time, they were people—and to Anderson, most of the time they'd been family. Unless he was making love, the one time a person got to let go of himself and be a part of a unit. That was when Anderson remembered, when the knowledge would hurt the most.

"Hey, C.J.," Julio said after a quiet moment, when C.J. prepared to follow his sister.

"Yeah?"

"You and Anderson, maybe in the next two weeks or so, you two want to come with me down to the hub? I don't know how he's doing. I mean, he seems fine, or I wouldn't ask, right? But I know me? I need a break. And you, brother? You look like death crapped you out and *then* warmed you up. What do you say? Some dancing with the party people in the hub? Could be just what the doctor ordered."

C.J.'s shoulders straightened, and his head and heart were suddenly about ten pounds lighter. It wasn't enough to fly, but still. "Sounds excellent, Jules. Man, remind me, I've got a couple of days off coming when we're done with this shit. I want to hit the bar hard, you hear?"

Julio's grin turned lascivious. "Maybe find someone else to hit hard, you know?"

C.J. flushed. No. Not with Anderson in their quarters, buying him soap and changing in front of him at every opportunity. Their thing might never actually become a *thing*, but C.J. wasn't going to hurt him now by reminding Anderson that he might still be crazy.

Julio's expression turned to sorrow. "I'm sorry, C.J., maybe not."

C.J. grimaced. “Maybe not. But it sure will feel good to go out dancing.” He turned and looked at Cassie as she slowed her pace to wait for him. She was going to make him and Anderson something for dinner that night that didn’t come from a rations package, and he’d been looking forward to it for two days. “I’ll ask Cassie and Marshall, ’kay?”

Julio looked surprised and then happy about it. “Yeah, sure. I bet your sister can *dance*.”

C.J. found that the idea of dancing with her, just to have fun, was incredibly appealing. “I bet she can too. Hit me up later for deets, ’kay Jules? I gotta skid out, right?”

“Right. We’ll make it a plan!”

C.J. caught up with Cass and asked her if she wanted to go dancing in a week or two, and she looked at him in mild surprise and a lot of gratitude.

“Yeah, sure. I think Marshall would like to get the hell out of the rim and go do something that doesn’t suck too. Thanks for the invite, Cyril. It’s really fucking human of you.”

C.J. shrugged. “Yeah, well, you’d better not fuck up dinner, Cass, or I’m gonna tell you the wrong day and ditch out. I’ve been looking forward to something decent for two days.”

Cassie put her pert little nose in the air and rolled her eyes like a pro. “Decent. As if. It’s going to blow your little tiny pea brain out a ventilator shaft and turn your taste buds to space dust, asshole. Decent. It’s going to be fucking *spectacular*.”

“Yeah, promises, promises. Go cook, woman. Anderson’s been packing on muscle these days, and I’m frickin’ *starving*.”

Cassie sobered. “I’m glad to hear it, Cyril,” she said softly. “Anderson really is looking healthier, but you’re losing weight by the kilo. This shit we’re watching, living with him, it’s all taking a toll on my jackass of a little brother. It’s not a lot of fun to watch, ’kay?”

C.J. looped an arm around her shoulders. “You know me, Cassie, I’m never down for long.”

Cassie looked at him, and her eyes hadn’t been this gentle since his first pet, an Arachnian tarantula-kitten (a mammal with eight legs and multi-faceted eyes) had gotten crushed by their father’s commuter cycle. “C.J., you never let yourself get knocked down before. Be careful, okay? I know you’re playing

mister big, responsible ‘I ain’t gonna get me some of that’, but just because you’re not hitting it doesn’t mean it’s not beating the shit out of you.”

C.J. took a breath and grinned, making himself as strong as he could so she wouldn’t worry about him. “C’mon, Cassie. You’ve met him. He’s adorable. He’s not going to hurt me.”

Cassie’s mouth thinned. “I’m not talking about on purpose, Cyril. I’m talking about what’s going to happen when he melts down and takes you with him.”

“He’s strong, Cassidy,” C.J. said, finally conceding that he had to take her seriously. “You’ve seen him. All that shit he did. He’s strong. Maybe he’s not going to melt down. Maybe he’s going to get here, and adapt, and assimilate into life, and fit right in.”

Cass stopped, seriously stopped him right there in the corridor, with the stripes leading to and from the spokes of the wheel and the myriad people passing them on either side. “You don’t really believe that, do you C.J.?” she asked, total concern in her voice.

C.J. looked at her and tried not to let the hurt he could feel welling up in his chest leak into his eyes. Failed. “It could happen,” he said weakly, and Cassie looked at him and nodded.

“Yeah, sure, baby. It could happen.”

I would have tried... just so you wouldn’t be alone....

He wondered if Cassie heard the words then, the ones she’d said after they’d watched Anderson’s sister send him into space. They were echoing in his head between them, then, and C.J. heard that she’d stand there with him, even if it meant she’d have a front row seat to watching C.J. go up in flames.

ANDERSON had a good time at Cassie and Marshall’s during dinner. He knew them well by now, and Michelle was there too. They talked a little about his physical therapy and how much better his stamina was than it had been a month ago when he’d arrived. Cassie and C.J. gave vague answers about how their work was progressing.

“We haven’t gotten to where the ship’s archival memory was compromised yet,” Cassidy said, dodging Michelle’s over-blunt question neatly. “We’ll let you know. But Julio is racking up discoveries for holo-science.” She looked at

Anderson in real admiration then. “By the way, everything you did that can be patented will be. Julio’s making sure of that. He’s even got places to sell the patents, if you like. He says he can make you very, very rich, and you know, it doesn’t matter where you settle down, that’s going to make it easier.”

Anderson nodded. “C.J. told me,” he said. “That’s fine. Let me know what I have to sign. I, uhm, don’t know where I’m going to end up either, but... well, like you said. That’ll make it easier.”

“Do you have any ideas what you want to do?” Marshall asked, bringing Anderson a fruit juice. (Cassie and C.J. had already discussed that that was all that should be served—neither of them wanted to find out what would happen if they drank too much around Anderson. There was *boatloads* of shit they couldn’t say!

Anderson sipped and shook his head. “Holo-science sounds good,” he said with a sly little grin, and everybody laughed. Everybody except C.J.—he had visions of Anderson constructing another group of friends that he would have to abandon or that he’d have to lie to or lie about. Those visions, along with Cassie’s grim projections of a personal meltdown, made it one of the least funny things C.J. had ever heard.

They talked, they ate—Cassie cooked and seasoned a mammal-bird better than anyone at the station, everybody agreed—and talked some more. Michelle told them stories about growing up on Hermes-Eight-Beta, where the earth would stretch out with grain to the horizon and the nearest settlement was half-a-day’s air-sled ride away. Marshall told them stories of his home planet Artellus, and how the human incursion into the explored galaxies had been told like a myth in his grandfather’s time, but by the time Marshall was a child, sixty Terran years before—Marshall had a slightly longer life cycle than most humans—the space-warp drive that made space travel possible and lucrative for humans had become commonplace.

“Our sun is not nearly as bright as the one here in the Hermes-Eight system,” he said, explaining the pale skin and hair. “Most of us who want to leave Artellus end up on space stations or darker, uh, moister planets.”

Cassie looked at him drolly. “Moister? Is that a word?”

Marshall blushed, the edge of his pale ears turning lavender. “Uh, damp? Whatever. It got me double shower rations as an employee before I took over the station for the company, so I’m not going to ask which word to use.”

“You’re just going to stay moist,” Cassie said with a twist to her lips.

Marshall leaned over and whispered something that was probably most definitely lascivious in her ear, and she blushed and stopped taunting him. Anderson met C.J.'s eyes and smirked, and C.J. blushed all the way down to his toes.

C.J. and Cassie's childhood came up, and C.J. let his sister tell his most embarrassing stories, hoping that maybe Anderson would see him as a person, a fallible one, and whatever Anderson felt for him, or thought he felt, it could be based on C.J.'s faults as well as the simple kindness of taking Anderson under his wing.

"He was awful," Cassie said bluntly, smiling into Anderson's eyes. "When he was eight years old, he decided that he wanted a pet. The campaign was *incessant*. Mom and Dad woke up and he'd say, 'I want a spider-kitten'. He'd brush his teeth and say, 'I was good, can I have a spider-kitten now?' For three months, he couldn't do a chore or obey a command or give up a concession without the words 'spider-kitten' coming out of his mouth. And finally, Mom was just at her wits' end. She was like, '*Fine*, C.J., what-the-hell-ever. Dad will go out and order you a spider-kitten, but you've got to tell us one thing. *Why* does it have to be a spider kitten?'"

C.J. laughed. He couldn't help it. It had been one of his better schemes.

"I didn't say it out loud," he said after a moment of exchanging truly evil grins with Anderson. "When did Mom tell you?"

Cassie just rolled her eyes. "Oh, she told me before Dad got home with Tuffles. She wanted me to have fair warning."

"I give," Anderson said, his eyes on C.J.'s face the entire time. "Why a spider-kitten?"

Cassie rolled her eyes again. "Because the damned things make this sticky-assed web, right? They cough it up like an Earth-cat coughs up hairballs. Anyway, he wanted to use them against me the next time we fought. He wanted the companionship—yeah. That was no joke—he's loved pets, always has, and he takes good care of them too. But the reason this one *had* to be a spider-kitten was so he could put kitten-puke-silk in my hair!"

The table broke up laughing, and C.J. grinned and shrugged. "Well, what can I say, Cass. You were so much fun to tease, you know?"

"And *you* were a miserable little heathen!" she shot back. They grinned at each other, and then, somehow, the weight of the last month seemed to settle on their shoulders, pushing them closer together. She swallowed. "You turned out

okay in the end,” she muttered, and he smiled back.

“Yeah, so did you.”

The dinner party broke up soon after that, and C.J. and Anderson made it back to their quarters in the quiet hum of the off-hours shift of the station.

They were right in front of C.J.’s door when Anderson stopped him by touching his shoulder.

“What?” C.J. asked, turning around with a smile.

“What part of my life did you watch today?” Anderson asked, suddenly very, very close to C.J., close enough that C.J. could feel his breath puffing lightly against his chin, and see how very dark brown his eyes were.

C.J.’s mouth went dry. “We’ve met Alpha,” he said, swallowing hard.

Anderson nodded. “I thought so. That’s why I stopped you.”

Breathe, C.J., breathe. “Why’s that?”

“Because. When we go inside, you won’t let me do this.”

Anderson’s lips were soft, just like C.J. had dreamed. They were soft, and C.J. parted his lips eagerly before them and opened his mouth with hunger as Anderson pushed the kiss forward. C.J. welcomed Anderson in, sighing as the kiss went long and deep and wet. Anderson thrust his hips forward, and C.J. bumped up against the door. They were in a public corridor, he realized, and he opened his eyes and broke off the kiss and took a deep, gulping breath.

He thumped his head against the door and tried to keep the space station from swimming under his feet. “God, Anderson. You’re right. We can’t do that. That’s....”

“C.J.?”

“Yeah?” Because letting Anderson talk saved C.J. the trouble of unscrambling his brains.

“I closed my eyes for you. And you tasted real. When we go inside, and you sleep on your side of the bed, I want you to remember that. You tasted real. It’s the most real I’ve ever had.”

And with that, Anderson hit the seal on the door himself, and C.J. had to step aside to let him duck into their quarters first.

He let the door slide closed for a moment after that and just stood there in the corridor, calming everything down from his racing heartbeat to his raging hard-on so he could walk into the quarters he shared with the boy... man, with

the man he was starting to become *very* attached to, and pretend that they were roommates and that C.J. didn't know exactly what Anderson had just told him after melting every nerve in his body with a kiss.

THE next day, Cassie and C.J. watched the screen as Anderson and his friends realized what a huge problem power rationing was going to become and Anderson had to make the decision to cut the school. It was the first time any of them—including the other holograms—got to see the violence that had been programmed into Alpha. The first hit had taken them by surprise. Anderson's knowledge of the violence had been worse.

And even though they all knew of the escalation, watching it happen had been hard to bear.

"Do it," Alpha said, barging into the little room that they had started sharing after the core of friends had moved into the house. Anderson had retreated there to brood over the decision, and the door slamming back had been loud and alarming.

"I said I needed some space!" Anderson protested. He'd asked everybody else, and they'd all stayed away.

For a moment, C.J. wanted to cheer. Hooray! Stand up for yourself, Anderson! You need some fucking space—this isn't a small decision!

"Need space for what? To decide if a group of people who don't exist are going to stop existing some more?"

"That's harsh!" Anderson snapped. "Those people have become my friends! Besides—I already agreed—I'm a murderer, right? Fine. I'll kill my friends."

Alpha snorted, waved his hand, rolled his eyes a little. "Your friends? You created them—and mostly, the ones in there are filler! The holograms you love the most live in this little house. Why keep the dead weight?"

"What about Mr. Kay!" Anderson burst out triumphantly. "He still has stuff to offer!"

A cavalier shrug. "The hell he does! You created him from the instructional files—Anderson, it's nice to be sentimental and everything, but this sentimentality is going to kill you if you don't let it go!"

“I don’t want to live if it means I have to do it alone!” Anderson shouted back.

And that was when Alpha’s hand moved, almost faster than light and hard enough to snap Anderson’s face to the side and throw him into the wall.

Alpha advanced then, grabbed Anderson’s jumpsuit front and hauled him up, shoving him back against the wall until he could stand up by himself.

Everybody watching gasped, shocked, even though they’d known it was coming. The frightening thing, though, was the expression on Anderson’s face as he’d pulled himself up. He not only looked as though he’d expected the outburst. He looked *relieved*.

“Your job is to live,” Alpha growled. “That’s all you have to do. I’d think even a pathetic fuck-up like yourself could figure that out!”

Anderson smiled a little and wiped the blood trickling from his nose and the side of his mouth. “If I’m pathetic, you’re worse. You’re the dream of my dreams, asshole. Who do you think I’m saving?”

Alpha swung at him again, and Anderson didn’t make any move to duck. Alpha’s fist connected with Anderson’s stomach, and real flesh or a clever concoction of air-currents, electricity, and synthesized will, it didn’t matter; the blow hurt. Anderson doubled over and coughed, spitting up a dollop of phlegm and blood.

“I’m saving your whining, angsty little ass, Anderson. Now go out there and make a decision like a man!”

“This isn’t your decision to make, Aaron,” Anderson snapped, struggling upright. “It’s mine. I’m the one who lives with the consequences. I’m the one who has to endure without the people that I kill. Me! But go ahead and beat me up for it. I like it.”

He snarled those last words, and C.J. had to swallow bile. Next to him, Cassidy wasn’t so lucky, and he heard her go bolting for the bathroom, which was closeted in the house hologram and disguised to look like one of those pleasant places with sunshine coming through the window and potpourri. The acoustics (brilliant, brilliant Anderson—they’d sat right there and watched him and Bobby program the muffling program) worked, and he couldn’t hear her getting sick, even though she was probably twenty feet away at the most.

He let the scene play out, even with her gone. Jesus, it was bad enough that he had to see it.

“I know you do, sweet thing,” Alpha taunted, stroking a finger along Anderson’s swelling jaw. “You love it. You hate yourself so much, I caught your disease, and now I hate you too. Good job, oh mighty leader. You’ve led by example.” His smile was tender and proud. “How’s that feel?”

Anderson closed his eyes then, and for the first time since Alpha had stormed into the room, he looked pained, and vulnerable, and weak. “It feels like it’s supposed to,” Anderson mumbled. “It feels exactly right.”

And with that, Alpha mashed his perfectly sculpted, pretty mouth into Anderson’s, and Anderson opened his swollen jaw and split lips and let him in, clinging to his shoulders weakly as his body trembled in reaction to the violence.

Alpha zipped off Anderson’s jumpsuit perfunctorily then and unceremoniously flipped him over so he was naked on their homemade bed. Alpha didn’t do much more undressing than freeing his cock from his fly, and Anderson didn’t protest as Alpha entered him dry.

When it was over and Anderson’s muffled sounds of pain had stopped, Alpha leaned over and kissed Anderson with the same tenderness he’d shown at the beginning of the relationship. “You know I love you, right?”

Anderson stared sightlessly straight ahead. “Yeah, Alpha. I love you too.”

But Anderson was facing the hidden camera, the one that had recorded all of the goings-on in this room since Anderson had created it. Anyone watching could see the truth.

C.J. closed his eyes against that knowledge in Anderson’s eyes. He knew. Just like when the sex was tender and the relationship was perfect, Anderson knew. Alpha wasn’t real. Not even his nightmares were there.

“Cass,” C.J. said shakily, “you almost done?” Very carefully, he forwarded the scene to the place where Anderson dragged himself up and cleaned himself off and then left Alpha in their room while he went to tell everyone else his decision. Alpha tucked his magnificently sculpted cock into his jumpsuit and zipped up.

“Yeah, baby,” Cass said. She sounded quiet but composed. “I’m back. Why?”

“It’s my turn.” Spots danced in front of his eyes as C.J. bolted for the head.

Chapter 13

Shouldas

WHEN everything played out, C.J. had a long list of things he should have done from that point on. He should have called Jensen and shipped Anderson straight planetside. He should have pulled himself from the situation entirely and devoted himself to Anderson's side. He should have done the exact opposite and pulled away entirely, allowing Anderson to heal, sending Anderson to people who could help him, while C.J. waited, hoped, and prayed that eventually, Anderson would be ready to embark on a relationship—a healthy, clean relationship, with C.J. at his side.

C.J. should have left, gone to another planet, another solar system, and maybe the two of them could have forgotten about each other completely.

C.J. would recite the shouldas incessantly for a little while, make a flog out of them, and flay himself repeatedly, but none of the shouldas could have changed the one fact, the one true thing that made them all completely irrelevant, completely impossible, and completely out of the question.

C.J. was far too involved in Anderson's life by now, far too entwined in Anderson's happiness, to leave. The only thing that had sustained C.J. in his horrible voyeuristic mission so far had been knowing that the real Anderson, who seemed happy, healthy, and laughing, would be waiting for him when he was done reviewing the shuttle recordings at the end of the day. Anderson had started to bring home dinner, and videos, the occasional friend, if the person knew C.J. first. He had Chips singing the lyrics to perfectly filthy songs, and he liked to clean and make the kitchenette and bedroom neat if he had too much time on his hands. He'd accessed the station's libraries, and he always had a new book—mostly fiction, surprisingly enough—cued up on C.J.'s computer book tablet. They'd take turns reading them, and then talking about them, and then finding other books by the same author.

They watched every comedy vid C.J. could access and then used some of C.J.'s copious credits pulling some up from planetside that *neither* of them had seen before.

C.J. could clearly remember one night when they'd been sitting on

opposite ends of the couch, laughing hard at a comedy, and suddenly it had hit him and hit him hard. He had watched Anderson as much as the video, waiting to see that sudden delight cross his face when something was funny. C.J. had waited, just a moment, as Anderson's head had tipped back and he laughed, before C.J. had laughed too. The video wasn't as funny if Anderson didn't enjoy it too.

C.J.'s snug little quarters weren't his if Anderson wasn't in there too.

So that entire list of shouldas that C.J. listed in the painful aftermath weren't really options. Not one of them had even crossed his mind.

Instead, he was sitting numbly on the couch when Anderson got home on another day during which the violence had erupted on the holo-vids, his legs curled up underneath him and a big icy glass of fruit juice in hand. He was seriously wishing the fruit juice were something stronger, something more potent, something that would smash his brain into oblivion and leave only the breathing, moving parts to function.

Anderson walked in, and the smile that stretched C.J.'s face felt alien—and life sustaining. Anderson was here. The real Anderson. Not the twisted, torn commander who had made the hard choices against his will, allowing himself to be beaten for them because that was what he thought he deserved. This Anderson smiled back and then looked concerned.

This Anderson sat cross-legged in the corner of the couch and said, "C.J., Jesus. You look awful. What happened?"

C.J. took a slug of fruit juice and said, feeling loopy and drunk on grief as he said it, "It wasn't murder."

Anderson blinked, and then his face... settled. The smooth youth that C.J. was used to seeing in his quarters sagged, lined, became old and hardened and resigned. It was a frightening transformation. If the face Anderson assumed in this moment hadn't been the face C.J. had seen on the video screen for the last week, he might have been frightened by it.

Now it just made him sad.

"Yeah, it was," Anderson said calmly. "I killed my friends so I could keep the holodeck illusion. I killed them so I could—"

"You were trying to survive," C.J. said, looking at him truly. Not flirtatiously, not surreptitiously, but face forward, seeing all of him—the frightened child, the abused spouse, the hardened commander. C.J. knew him, from age twelve to age... God. He'd be twenty-three in a matter of days. They'd

take him out, C.J. thought, drinking more juice. They'd take him to the hub and let him play like the young man he was, the young man he'd never had a chance to be.

"That doesn't change what I did to make that happen," Anderson said, keeping that calm, quiet resignation about him. His narrow, rounded chin had never seemed so vulnerable.

"It does," C.J. said, finding that he was crying. "You didn't kill them. You... you put them on hold. I could call them up at any moment."

"I deleted them," Anderson said, his face growing even harder—and that chin quivering more alarmingly. "You haven't gotten there yet. I had to. We needed to buy time to put the archives on the screen. It was happening so fast. I killed them. I decided that their existence was less important than mine, after I brought it about."

"They weren't real," C.J. said, wiping his face miserably. "You know that. I saw your face when..."

"That doesn't count," Anderson said, losing his own battle. He wiped his face silently. "It doesn't count. Because I knew what he was. I knew what he was and I let him into my bed and into my life, and I treated him like he was real. Everyone else was under the rules, don't you see that? You can't just say he was and they weren't or the other way around. You can't. That's—"

"Don't tell me that it's cheating!" C.J. stood up and took two steps forward in the modest space of his quarters. "Don't tell me that it's cheating. You did what you had to, Anderson. You lived. God..." He turned around, wiping his face with the palm of his hand. "Don't you see? I'm so glad you made it. I love... I love having you here. My life... it would be so much less if you hadn't made it, if I'd never known..."

C.J. couldn't finish that thought. He couldn't. He shook his head and remembered that he was the strong one, the healthy one, and that he was the one who would help.

"You needed to survive," C.J. said at last. He was in the corner of the room, staring blindly at a print he'd put up of the ocean, planetside. The sea was brilliant blue and green, and the violet kelp had washed ashore, and the sunset had turned the horizon shades of apricot and rose, and the sky was purple and indigo. The three moons were all aligned and in various stages of shadow, bright as opals, with the colors the sun was throwing off the landscape shifting in their faces.

He'd taken the picture on a trip he'd made after the breakup with Jensen,

when he'd decided that when he settled down, it would be with someone who loved him for him, not who he should be, or might be, or could be. The photo had all his favorite colors in the world in it.

Except for the brown of Anderson's eyes.

"I'm damned glad you survived."

He felt Anderson's hands on his shoulders then, felt the heat from his body seeping through their clothes. Anderson was shorter by half a head, and he pushed himself against C.J., and C.J. could feel the muscles, the heft, the weight he'd put on working out this last month, eating healthy, being around people, and generally recovering. Mostly, though, C.J. could feel that he was *solid*, and *warm*, and *real*. Suddenly, bleakly, he wondered if maybe Anderson needed to go out into the world and be with other men, just to know that there was more than one *solid*, *warm*, and *real* person in the world.

Still, that didn't stop C.J. from leaning back into Anderson's arms, just for a moment.

"You know I'm that person you saw on the screen," Anderson said, and it was heartbreaking, the way he expected that knowledge to turn C.J. away.

"I know you were brave," C.J. said softly, feeling it. "I know you were brave, and you were making the only decisions you could, and you didn't deserve what happened to you, any of it."

Anderson made hushing noises and smoothed the backs of C.J.'s shoulders, and C.J. wanted nothing more than to turn into his arms, kiss that pouty mouth, and make it all better. But he was conscious, so very conscious, that he shouldn't. Being with Anderson after seeing that, when he was Anderson's only tether to reality. How many nights had he heard that broken voice echoing in the dark, after he'd comforted that silent screaming?

How fucked up am I, C.J.?

We don't know yet, baby.

Well C.J. had an idea now, didn't he? And there weren't any words for what had happened inside of Anderson's head in that hells-long ten-year journey. With a wrench from what he wanted to do, C.J. turned and pulled Anderson into his chest in the sweet, platonic, brotherly hug he'd been giving him in bed when the silent screams broke their sleep.

"Do you hear me, baby?"

Anderson went boneless against him. "Just calling me 'baby' doesn't make you want me any less," he pointed out, and C.J. closed his eyes.

“Don’t you think you have enough to worry about without taking a total fuck-up like myself into your bed?” he asked, begging Anderson to hear his tone and follow his lead and smile.

Instead, Anderson pulled back a little and surveyed C.J. soberly in the dim light from the front room lamp. “I meet people, real people, during the day, C.J. I meet people who spend all their money at the hub, and people recovering in physical therapy because they’re clumsy or didn’t think something through. I sit at the kiosks and watch relationships that make my time with Alpha look like a country picnic.”

C.J. pulled one corner of his mouth up. “Your point being...?”

“Don’t patronize me, C.J. You’re not a fuck-up, and I know exactly what it is I like about you and why I want you.”

C.J. closed his eyes and pulled Anderson to his chest again, because he couldn’t do this when they were face to face. “Why is that?”

Anderson’s voice was muffled against him, but he didn’t struggle. Not this time. “I want you because you’re kind and you’re real,” he said softly, and C.J. squeezed his eyes tight, and that still didn’t stop them from burning. “And because you care enough to think that sleeping with me is wrong, even though you really, really want to do it.”

C.J. had to chuckle, and again he tried to lighten the moment. He thrust his hips at Anderson a little, just enough for the man to tell that C.J. wasn’t unaffected by being close, by being intimate, and Anderson pulled back, surprised.

“If you’re not going to use that, grinding on me is just mean,” Anderson complained, but he was smiling kindly back, and C.J. nodded, although he didn’t let Anderson go.

“You want to go out dancing?” he asked, out of the blue. “Julio is getting some people together next week to go out dancing. It’s your birthday next week. You want to go down to the hub and hit the clubs and go dancing for your birthday?”

Anderson’s smile was... God. It was beautiful. It was blinding. It was healthy and whole and strong.

C.J. looked at him and smiled back, and felt that strengthening body against his, and tried to block out the memories of seeing that body brutalized, abused, and violated. Desperately, he tried not to wonder at the emotional fracture hidden beneath that new growth of joy.

JENSEN *never* looked this worried. He hadn't looked this worried when C.J. broke up with him, when he blew out his kneecap throwing disc on the beach, or when he asked Molly to move in with him. C.J. had known Jensen for eleven years, ever since their first year in university together, and he had never seen this level of concern even *exist* on his friend's emotional range.

"Send him down planet *now*," Jensen commanded, and C.J. grimaced.

"Now? Jen? Do you really think now's a good time? He's still visiting with the other holos once a day, and I'm the only person he's really attached to. I mean, now? Can't we wait until my break, until we get this project done and *then* send him—"

"Now, C.J.—don't tell me you don't see how dangerous this is to you!"

Wince. "Well, really, Jen, I'm mostly worried about Anderson. You're the one who said I needed to hang in there through the long haul."

Jensen groaned and thumped his head against his desk in front of the computer console. "I didn't mean for you to self-destruct with him, you moron!"

C.J. had to crack a smile. "I'm fine, Jensen," he said gently. "Truly. All good. Cassie and I made a pact—we haven't gotten drunk in almost two weeks now, and, well, we hold each other up while we're screening the recordings."

Jensen groaned again and looked up at C.J. with weary eyes. "The fact that you're even watching this shit is fucking you up, Cyril."

"Aw, crap, you're not calling me 'Cyril' too!"

"I'll call you whatever the hell I need to in order to get you to ship that boy planetside, and if you really loved me, you'd come with him and send your I-know-all-sorts-of-bullshit sister too. This is bad. Bad, bad, bad, bad, bad...."

"Six different degrees in abnormal psychology—"

"Three!"

"And all I can get from you is 'bad'?" C.J. shook his head and tsked with his tongue. "Really, Jensen, I'm surprised at you. I expected better. Really did."

Jensen slammed his fist down on his desk, and C.J. popped his head back, even though they were only interfacing through the computer screen. "Don't fuck with me here, C.J.—I'm not bullshitting you. This is bad shit. It's bad for you and Cassie to watch it, and it's bad for Anderson to deal with, and you are all going to need my help. You need it *now*, not a month from now, not when

your leave is due, but *now*, or one of you is going to completely melt down, self-destruct, and maybe, if you're lucky, it won't be you, and if you're really lucky, and it's Anderson, he won't bring down the entire fucking space station. Do you fucking understand me?"

C.J. did. He pulled in a big breath and let it out and allowed some of his bravado to slip out with it. "Jensen, I don't want to yank him away from the shuttle *and* me at the same time, okay? I hear you, but don't you think a sudden break might be worse than, say, a prearranged vacation? I can take him down, show him the sights, and make a prolonged stop at your clinic, one that maybe goes past my leave, until you're ready to send him back up."

"Why would he want to come back up if he's better, C.J.?" Jensen asked, his voice hard, and C.J. stopped and flushed suddenly, so badly that he started to sweat too.

"In case he wants to," C.J. replied, his throat so dry that his voice whispered out. "You know. He's got friends here. He can work about half a dozen jobs up here, if he wants. It's a place to—"

"Do you love this kid, Cyril?" Jensen asked, so baldly and so gently that C.J. could only look away from the screen.

"Yeah," he confessed.

"Then you're going to have to, at some point, leave him alone and let him come to you. Do you understand me?"

C.J. nodded. He'd had that thought about six billion times himself. "Yeah."

Jensen sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to break your heart, but...." He paused, and C.J. hated himself, because Jensen paused because C.J. was wiping his eyes on his sleeve, feeling like a total asshole. C.J. pulled himself together, and Jensen continued. "But you need to know it's coming. His feelings for you could be very real, but he's not going to be able to feel them, really feel them, and know that they're true, unless he and I work out some shit, okay?"

C.J. nodded. "I know. You know I'm good with it. I'm not normally such a pussy about my feelings, Jen, but...."

"But you've been watching this kid get abused six ways and sideways in a really fucked up situation, and your heart is breaking for him. I hear you. That's why I'm saying that you can't wait much longer here. One of you is going to do or say something that's going to trigger an emotional bomb here, and I don't know if you're ready for the fallout."

C.J. nodded again. "Can you give us a week, at least?" he asked, feeling

pathetic. “We’re taking him out for his birthday, and he’s really looking forward to it.”

Jensen nodded. “Of course. Of course. I’m not a total hard-case—give the guy a birthday with real candles, right?”

C.J. grinned, trying very hard to lighten things up. “And a dance night at the hub. We *are* on the space station. We should do it up right!”

Jensen groaned and went back to thunking his head on the table again, but C.J. managed to smile through the horrible oppression that had begun to dog his every hour since they’d reached the “abuse section of the Anderson program,” as Cassie had called it.

“Come on, Jen, some dinner, some dancing, let Anderson have his fun. I’ll tell him tomorrow that we need to take him planetside. I’ll make arrangements with Marshall, spend a week or so there, and then come back at the break.”

Jensen looked at him soberly. “You sure you want to commit to all of that? It’s going to be a long haul, CJ. It’s going to take more than one cycle.”

C.J. looked away. “It’s not like... it’s not like I’ll even feel like seeing anyone else in the meantime, okay? I...” Suddenly, he had to be real. “You’re right,” he said softly, looking at Jensen through the computer. “My chest is shredded, I can’t sleep, and I’m crying all the fucking time, man. I’m too fucked up to get involved with anyone else, and I sure as shit am not going to blow off Anderson for a fuckbuddy just to prove that I’m all right, okay? But... we’re his home now. He needs to know we’re with him on this, and he needs to know he has a place to come back to when it’s over. You feel me?”

Jensen popped his hands on the desk like he was pounding drums and nodded, sort of his characteristic way of saying, “So be it.”

“You love him, man,” was what Jensen did say. “You love him so much, you’re making plans to go to hell for him.”

C.J. grinned. “Just make sure you’ve got my return ticket booked, right, buddy?”

“Yeah, baby. Don’t worry about it. I’ve got you when you fall.”

C.J. AND Cassie could hardly look at the screen anymore. At this point, they recorded the painful, page-by-page pull up of the archival footage and scanned it into the station’s computers so it would never be lost, then made note of what Alpha’s triggers were. At night, when everyone on the shuttle went to bed,

someone (usually Anderson) would program the next segment of media to play for the holo-recorders. Fortunately there were markers for that, because after Alpha and Anderson began their painful go-round—not every night, but did it have to be?—C.J. and Cassie would turn the sound down and look at their hands, or the power readouts, or at the blank wall of the house where the holograms hid, because they didn't want to see it.

“So,” Cassie said, very carefully not watching as Alpha strangled Anderson during sex. In the background, there was a folk singer from Anderson's colony playing—her voice was hauntingly beautiful, and someday, C.J. wanted to hear this song, this lovely, playful, wailing song, played loudly and in its entirety. But not now.

They knew Anderson woke up. They did. Anderson, the real Anderson, was walking the ship, looking healthier and happier by the hour. They didn't need to see this again. They just needed to record the music feed that was playing over the holodeck's intercom while it was happening so that this song was not lost forever with the death of the singer.

“So what?” C.J. answered, very carefully not watching the same thing. He'd looked up Alpha's program on the console. He knew that it would take two keystrokes to delete him—that was all. Two keystrokes, and that fucker would be dead, gone for good, cancelled forever. It did no good to tell himself that Alpha was just an extension of Anderson. At this point, that didn't even feel real anymore. Yes, Anderson possessed some of those qualities, but then, didn't everybody? Isolated, put under pressure, forced into action by Anderson's reluctance to hurt the things he'd created, Alpha had become monstrous, barbaric, a thing apart.

“So, you've put in for some leave when this is over?”

C.J. nodded. “I told Marshall I'd take the job as second in command if I could spend some time planetside making sure Anderson's okay before my next month off. I...” C.J. swallowed. “He's a nice kid. He needs someone.”

Cassie nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I, uhm, I think I'll join you.”

C.J. laughed, and it was an anemic, depressed sort of sound. “Jensen has a suite booked for us, I think.”

“Good,” Cassie said, her eyes darting toward the screen. “Make sure I have flowers every day. If I'm going to the funny farm, I want some fucking flowers.”

The horrible farce had played itself out, and Anderson was unconscious, naked, and vulnerable on the bed.

C.J. looked, too, and watched as Alpha masturbated on the unconscious Anderson, coming in a clockwork spurt over his face. He turned away at the climax and closed his eyes. Once, and once only, he'd watched with sort of a clinical detachment to see which parts of Alpha lasted past this moment. Did the bruises he left fade immediately? No. The bite marks on Anderson's skin? No. But the come? The spit? The other things? Yes. Those things faded almost immediately. And Anderson had already said there was no lingering smell.

"Gonna share those flowers, Cass? I, uhm, kind of like those pink things that look like morning glories from old Earth, myself."

Cassie nodded. Without looking at the screen, she made some adjustments to the recording and turned up the audio. The first song playing on the intercom had ended, and the next one began, so she made note of that in the records and left the audio on. In the morning, the people on the ship would list the songs and the singers and musicians in big print on a tablet and hold it up to the one camera they knew existed, the one in the living room where they watched vids on screen in the evenings. By now, everyone knew all the vids word for word, but that didn't keep them from watching, from trying very hard to share some fellowship in the intense, pressure-filled atmosphere of the tiny ship, running on emotional and physical fumes.

"We can have adjoining rooms. You and Anderson can share."

C.J. looked at her and, without looking, managed to gesture to that still, pathetic figure, naked on the bed. "You really think he's going to be up for sharing a room with anyone?"

Cassie nodded somberly. "Count on it, C.J. You might be the only person in the world he could ever trust again."

So ALL things considered, *God*, was C.J. looking forward to going out to dance.

He and Cassie were down to the end of the recordings by now, and he watched compassionately as Marshall all but dragged Cassidy out of the shuttle every night. C.J. wished fruitlessly for someone, male, female, Artellian, human, or damned spider-kitten, who would come to the shuttle and grab his hand and walk him down the shuttle plank and tell him that it was all going to be okay.

Instead, he went to his quarters, where Anderson waited for C.J. to tell Anderson that exact thing, and it got harder and harder every day.

Near the end of Anderson's journey, in the months before the shuttle had

made contact with Hermes-Eight space station, Anderson had been begging for death, and Alpha had been sparing him from the ultimate beating out of spite. C.J. knew a little about what space did to people and a little about what space did to machines, and the one thing he knew for certain was that what space had done to Anderson was going to require more than a month of free-fall on the space station for Anderson to recover from ten and a half years of isolation and nearly six years of abuse. Anderson's blank-faced acceptance of what had happened only served to send the chills deeper into C.J.'s bones.

"You didn't deserve it," C.J. said again over fruit juice and dinner after talking to Jensen and then enduring a particularly bad day of watching Anderson's life unspool. "I know you're thinking that, but you didn't."

"You sound like Kate," Anderson said blankly. "Kate used to tell me that."

C.J. knew this. He'd watched the videos, but he didn't remind Anderson of that. "Kate's smart," C.J. said, and then Anderson blew all of his comfort out of the water by stating the truth as he saw it.

"Kate's the part of me that wanted me to forgive myself," Anderson said. "She's not particularly trustworthy."

They were sitting at the little counter at the kitchenette after a simple dinner, and C.J. grabbed Anderson's hand then and squeezed. "That's real," C.J. said softly. "And I've never been so serious about anything in my entire life."

Anderson squeezed his hand, closing those thick-lashed, well-dark eyes. "I trust you," he whispered. "But I don't believe you. I'm sorry."

His silent screams that night had been particularly bad.

That hadn't been the first or the worst of Anderson's breaks from reality or fugues through what was real and what had been going on in the depths of the shuttle and the labyrinth of his own mind for years. Even before C.J. told Anderson that he didn't deserve it, hell, even before he'd talked to Jensen, the disintegration of Anderson's personal reality matrix had finally begun to show. The week before that conversation, as they were falling asleep with their bodies touching in the breathing dark, Anderson had sat up suddenly, looking at C.J. with wide, frightened eyes.

"Tell me your name!"

"Cyril John Poulson!" C.J. had barked, alarmed, and Anderson blinked.

"C.J.?"

"Well, yeah!" Maybe it had been a dream, one of those scary moments

when sleep was about to take over and the body just jumped out of itself.

“You live at the space station,” Anderson said, almost like he was checking off a list.

“Yeah. You’ve been, uhm, staying with me, Anderson, remember?”

Anderson had looked at him in the dark and seized his hand, then brought it up to his mouth. Slowly, as though he was afraid of what would happen, he popped C.J.’s thumb into his mouth and suckled, nibbling with his teeth.

C.J. whined and tried to pull his hand back, but Anderson kept suckling, tasting, rubbing his tongue along the webbing, clasping C.J.’s hand in his own. C.J.’s breath quickened, and his next words were choppy and uneven. “Uhm, Anderson? What are you doing?”

Anderson moaned and put his head on the pillow, facing C.J. and wiping his wet thumb against Anderson’s cheek and jaw and neck. C.J. could feel the tremble in his hands.

“You have taste,” Anderson whispered. “Alpha didn’t taste like anything. Not even his come. Your skin is salty. I never figured out how to program that.”

He’d clutched C.J.’s hand until he slept. When his breathing finally evened out, C.J. stood, shaking out his arm because it had fallen asleep, and went into the bathroom to work very hard at pulling himself together for Anderson’s nightmares. He only partially succeeded, but Anderson didn’t comment that C.J. was a mess—he was too busy doing what he always did in the middle of the night, screaming without making a sound.

That moment was bad—so bad. C.J. didn’t delude himself that it was as bad as it would get, but it was one of the reasons he’d forced himself to be honest with Jensen. C.J. couldn’t help Anderson if he was a dire mess, could he? Still, he might have put up more of a fight about taking their boy planetside and committing him to a stay in Jensen’s facility if he’d thought that Anderson’s reality breaks were limited to moments of doubt about the most intimate of details.

But other things had happened, moments that proved that Anderson had come to doubt every moment of his existence, and C.J. didn’t know how a man could live believing that every moment, every taste, sight, sound, story playing out around him actually had its origins in his own mind.

The man who ran their favorite food kiosk called C.J. on his monitor. “Your young space-farer isn’t doing too well, C.J.—Doctor Michelle’s busy.

Maybe you want to come get him?"

C.J. had torn out of the shuttle, leaving his sister alone to turn off the screen and say goodbye to the holograms (they both did this, every night, because it only felt polite) while he sprinted across the space station to the kiosk in the spoke nearest their quarters.

Anderson was sitting at one of the small tables, staring at the passersby with the most terrible, lost expression on his face.

"Uh, Anderson?"

Anderson snapped his head up, and a look of the most profound relief crossed his face. "Oh God. C.J.—it's you. It's you, and you have a taste, and you're here."

C.J. nodded, feeling his stomach congeal. "Yeah, and so are you. I guess you've been here for about two hours, and, uhm, you're sort of creeping the hell out of people."

Anderson grimaced then, his apple cheeks bunching up, a truly sheepish look crossing his face. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I forgot for a moment that we docked, you know? I couldn't figure out how I'd made this place when I don't remember ever seeing anything like it when I was a kid."

C.J.'s eyes widened in horror, but Anderson just gave that sunny, beaming grin.

"You see, I saw this couple. I'll have to tell Cassie about them, because I think the man is probably beating the hell out of the woman—they just had that vibe, you know, and I thought, 'They're just like me and Alpha', and then, suddenly, I couldn't remember how I got here." Anderson shook his head, looking a little embarrassed, like he'd spilled a drink or something. "Thank God you showed up. I couldn't remember where in the hologram I put the bridge."

The night after C.J.'s little talk with Jensen, he sat Anderson down and told him that they would probably be going planetside together. Anderson had looked excited, fascinated, and not at all dismayed that he was going to go have his head shrunk by the best guy on the planet.

The next day he'd spoken to the thin air as he and C.J. had walked down the corridor toward the physical therapy pool, because C.J. wanted to work out as well.

"Anderson, who are you talking to?"

Anderson looked at him, puzzled. "Bobby. Can't you see him? He just

said....” Anderson made that now-familiar grimace again. “Shit. I keep forgetting. This isn’t the shuttle. It’s real, and Bobby’s not here.”

C.J. had strained the muscles in his back swimming that day and needed a pain reliever, an ice pack, and a sonic wand to put them back to rights. As Michelle had passed the sonic wand over his strained muscles, she’d asked him what he thought he was swimming from.

“The shit in Anderson’s head.”

“Oh holy Christmas, C.J.—I’d strain something too getting away from that crap.”

She hadn’t asked him any more questions after that.

So C.J. needed a night like tonight—a night when it was all about dancing and playing and having fun. A night when he could watch Anderson laugh and not worry about wanting him or not wanting him or about letting him down.

Every night, they lay down in the same bed, and C.J. held that strengthening body next to his own and *yearned*. He wanted... he wanted to kiss that full mouth whenever Anderson looked at him with all of that aggressive flirtation. He *wanted* to walk behind Anderson as he was dressing and run his hand slowly from his neck to the base of his spine, feeling the texture of his skin, hearing the sounds he’d make when his body was touched, from top to bottom, with C.J.’s hands and lips. He *wanted* to sink to his knees in front of Anderson and pull that impressive cock into his mouth and suck on it roughly, not perfectly, and show Anderson what making love, true making love, felt like. The kind where you *didn’t* look away at climax because you knew that you were faking it, and you didn’t want your partner to see.

C.J. wanted to hear the noises Anderson would make when C.J. was inside his body, and he wanted Anderson to feel C.J.’s come, hot, slippery, salty/creamy/bitter, sliding between their stomachs when Anderson was inside C.J.

God, C.J. was *desperately* horny and so terribly afraid of any way he could take his release without Anderson knowing. Even masturbating in the shower had become a sort of concession to Anderson’s unhealthy desire, but that didn’t stop C.J. from doing it.

He would emerge, skin soft and smelling of the sharp, pine-brine-musk scent that Anderson had bought for him, and Anderson would wait for him to

walk into the bedroom before coming up behind him. Anderson wouldn't touch him—because, C.J. thought bitterly, that would probably be *cheating*—but he was so good at standing just behind C.J., rubbing his hands just outside of C.J.'s skin, scenting the hollow behind his shoulders, and whispering.

“Did you think of me in the shower tonight?”

“That’s an inappropriate question, Anderson, and you’re aware of that.”

Anderson’s tongue darted out ever so delicately and traced a drop of gifted recycled water down C.J.’s shoulder blade. C.J. sucked in a breath so harsh it hurt.

“You thought of me,” Anderson said with satisfaction, and C.J. groaned softly.

“How do you know?”

“After ten years alone on that shuttle, do you think I don’t know the smell of come that’s not mine? Is it on your fist, C.J.?” He moved around to C.J.’s front and pulled C.J.’s hand to his nose, much like he had when he’d put C.J.’s thumb in his mouth in the middle of the night. This time, though, he went directly to the webbing between C.J.’s thumb and forefinger and suckled hard.

C.J. snatched his hand away, but it was too late. Anderson looked at his returning erection with knowing eyes and smiled that flirty, predator’s smile. “You taste like come,” Anderson said, the words all in his throat. “Someday, you’ll taste like mine.”

Chapter 14

The Crackling Façade of Reality

ANDERSON was wearing one of his new outfits tonight, this one bright and slinky, a tight black bodysuit with a tank-style top and a bright, belted tunic over that. It reminded C.J. that Anderson had been swimming every day for nearly two months while C.J. had only gone every other. Anderson's thinness was now slender, muscled strength, and his hair had been re-cut in a different style, this style shorter and less wispy, making him look less like a lost boy and more like a young man who was aware of his own prettiness.

His big, fathomless brown eyes remained the same, with their dark fringe of lashes, and the range of emotion on his expressive face was still fascinating and heartbreaking to watch, but the other changes—those were the changes that bred confidence, that made Anderson seem healthy and able and oh, so desirable.

It was a lie that C.J. needed very much to believe.

C.J. took care with his own appearance that night. He wore classic faux-denim, with the graffiti-style hologram stitching and a tight black tank with a bright turquoise overshirt. He'd gotten his hair buzzed tight to his head, with the exception of the little compact wedge of tight coffee-blond curls at the top, and his light green eyes were big and luminous in his wide-cheekboned face. He splashed a little bit of Anderson's scent on his cheeks, a smell that made his stomach both tighten with desire and roil with anxiety at the same time, and wondered if maybe the gods would favor him and he'd be able to simply get off, come in his shorts while being coiled and uncoiled in the sinuous press of throbbing bodies at the dance club. Compared to the terrible confusion of protection, pity, and desire he'd felt for Anderson these past two months, anything was preferable.

Then Anderson saw him emerging from the bedroom, and his eyes lit up, and C.J. didn't want an anonymous press of bodies. He wanted *that*—that beautiful combination of appreciation and possession on Anderson's face and that aggressive, flirtatious sideways look from those brown eyes.

“You look good enough to be my birthday present,” Anderson said, wiggling his eyebrows, and C.J. swallowed and tried to be the responsible grown-up who would make sure Anderson had a healthy approach to sexual relations in his new environment.

“We’re going to be in a club at the hub, Anderson. I’m pretty sure you can go shopping for a birthday present, if you like.” He wasn’t kidding. The hub featured all sorts of entertainments that, if not frowned upon planetside, were at least a lot more easily covered in inhibition. If people wanted to party, gamble, cheat on their spouses, buy sex they’d rather their neighbors not know about, dance naked in a club of non-humans—not that C.J. was planning to take Anderson there—or try a substance banned on Hermes-Eight but not banned by the Space Trade Federation (who, coincidentally, owned the station), they did it in the hub of the space station. About the only thing the hub *didn’t* have was an amusement park, complete with roller coasters and anti-gravity rides—but from what C.J. understood, they were working on it.

C.J. and Julio and Michelle explained all of this to Anderson as they were walking around the middle rim to the spoke exactly opposite the shuttle bay. Marshall and Cassidy were joining them in the restaurant below, and from there, they were planning on the dancing that C.J. had been looking forward to all week.

“We had amusement parks on the holodeck,” Anderson said excitedly. “They used *so* much power, but they were a lot of fun!”

Julio got excited back. “I know, little man, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. We’ve got some big men who run the hub who would *love* to hire you on, right? I’ve patented your designs, so right now, you’re the only one who can work on that shit, and they want you *bad*.”

Anderson’s face lit up for a moment and then fell. “We’ve got to go planetside,” he apologized. “Right, C.J.?”

C.J. nodded, and Julio looked at him sharply. None of them—C.J., Cassie, Marshall, or Michelle—had advertised that C.J. and Cassie were going down for a little job-funded PTSD treatment or that Anderson was going to need his head shrunk for a good long time before he was functional. “Yeah,” he said now, meeting Julio’s eyes. “We’re going to go spend some time at Jensen’s facility. I already got him to promise that Cassie gets flowers in her room.”

Julio had been spared a lot of what Cassie and C.J. had sat through, but still, the other holograms talked. Or, sometimes, didn’t talk, as Julio told C.J.

once. Apparently, when the vid-screen viewing had been particularly brutal, the other holograms retreated outside and ignored anyone coming and going into the shuttle. Julio knew it had been rough, but C.J. didn't think he'd known it was bad enough to send two of the station's senior staffers planetside for some R and R.

Julio saw the truth of that now and nodded. "Well, Anderson, as soon as you want to come back, you just call up here and contact me. I'll hook you right up, okay? We'll get you a job, and you and C.J. can hang out, and it'll all be gravy!"

Anderson blinked. "I don't think that was a mining colony expression," he said politely, and C.J.'s chest ached a little more.

"It's an old Terran expression," C.J. said softly. "It means 'everything's going to be all right'."

Anderson smiled smugly and then grabbed C.J.'s hand, casting one of those sideways looks that told C.J. that the little shit knew that short of yanking his hand away and making a scene, C.J. couldn't do a damned thing about it.

"As long as C.J. and I are tight," Anderson said, his eyes flickering sideways again, "you're right, Julio. I can build roller coasters out of thin air, and it'll all be gravy."

DINNER was lovely. The restaurant had intimate, darkened booths, big enough even for the six of them, and they ate braised quad-mammal from Hermes-Eight-Prime and fresh greens from one of the many eco-cycles that the space station towed around Hermes-Eight-Prime in its orbit.

Michelle and Julio carried the bulk of conversation this time, regaling Anderson with stories of some of the less mainstream species they'd come to know and some of the weirder meldings of technology and psychosis that Cassie and C.J. had encountered. Some of the stories Anderson had heard before, and some of them were ones that C.J. hadn't wanted to tell because it made working in the space station sound more dangerous than it was.

Anderson apparently knew C.J. more than was comfortable, though, because he turned toward the end of dessert and said, "Oh my God! C.J., you're like a hero or something!"

C.J.'s entire body went hot. "Marshall was the one who hit the button

closing the bay doors,” he mumbled, and Marshall snorted.

“He’s going to make a great second, isn’t he? The federation is going to give *me* all sorts of credit because C.J. is two tons of absolutely amazing.”

C.J. blushed harder, thinking about letting Anderson sleep in his bed at night and how every muscle in his groin ached from being tightened unbearably into a steel-spring of want. He thought about falling apart badly enough to need a trip to the planetside treatment facility, badly enough that he was afraid he wouldn’t be there for Anderson when Anderson was the one who had suffered the most.

“I’m not that amazing,” he said softly, retreating back to the shadows of the booth. The conversation continued, and Anderson leaned back, too, talking softly to him in the darkness.

“I think you’re amazing,” Anderson said, trying to pull up his big, sunbeam-style grin. Tonight, it was tinged with melancholy, much like C.J.’s mood.

“I think you need to get out more,” C.J. said, trying to joke about it. He was not prepared for Anderson’s scowl and the stubborn glare that made his brown eyes cold.

“Maybe so,” he snapped, and then he sat forward. “Thank you, Marshall. It was an amazing dinner. Are we ready to go dancing now?”

THE dance club was loud, with strobing lights and thrusting bodies and music that pounded in primal throbs.

To C.J., for just a moment, it looked like a big emotional hot tub ready to suck all his troubles away. He looked to where Anderson stood, and shuddered, his yearning for the dance floor suddenly eclipsed by foreboding.

Anderson hadn’t said much as they’d ventured from the restaurant to the club, but he’d sent C.J. calculating, fulminating glances filled with both lust and determination. For a moment, C.J. had felt oddly off-center. There was something familiar about that look, something that froze his blood a little, something that should have been terrifying instead of arousing.

C.J. saw that look again as they were standing there, on the fringe of the seething dance mob, and just as he thought *Alpha* with a terrible chill, the look changed.

It became Anderson's look again, flirty, predatory, but not angry. Anderson sent that look C.J.'s way, and C.J.'s cock became immediately hard, and then Anderson slid into the dance crowd as though he'd spent an entire wastrel youth in its center.

Cassie gave a half-surprised, half-concerned bark of laughter and then looked at C.J. in exasperation. "What the hell are you waiting for?" she shouted above the noise. "He wants you to go get him!"

C.J. paused for a moment before plunging into that crowd. So much of the last two months had been about him being in control, and so much about that crowd was about letting control go. *Anderson's alone in there. It's as frightening being lost in the crush of the crowd as it is being lost with light-years between you and the next pulse.*

It was that thought that sent him tumbling into heart of the sex music, and for a giddy, heady moment, he lost himself in it. There was a firm male body behind him, rampant erection tight against stretched pants, and it nudged and slid along his crease as hard male hands grabbed his hips. He moved then, teasing, feeling the length of that stranger's cock through the fabric of his jeans and the hard hands sliding up his ribs and across his chest. *So good.*

A woman came up to him, her breasts visible through the wet, sheer swath of fabric sticking to her skin and allowing her nipples to poke through. For a moment, they teased the smooth skin of his chest, and then her hands came up and rubbed his pectorals, shiny silver nails scraping along his nipples. He grunted, thrust against her, realized that she had nothing on underneath her short vinyl skirt, and pulled back—right into the giant with the hard-on at his back. *Ah, gods. Anderson!*

He whirled then, found himself face to face with a slight young boy barely a man, whose face and body were covered in nothing but skin dye in sparkling, fluffy white, for clouds, and the stunning blue of a spring day sky. His pubic area was shaved clean, and his penis lay, half erect, painted white to match the cloud that covered his entire crotch. His hands made a *very* personal perusal of C.J.'s waist band, and he was about a breeze away from lowering C.J.'s zipper when C.J. put his hands on the young man's shoulders with gentle but firm intention and slid sideways. He allowed hands on his flesh, teasing, cupping, squeezing, fingers tracing his crease through his pants, his cock under his fly, the muscles on his chest and his stomach, then rising to pinch his nipples. After a few moments, he relaxed into it, allowed himself to be fondled, aroused, pressed, and rocked, using his hands and his hips to stroke through the sweet touches of

rampant sex like a swimmer strokes through a river current, whirling through eddies and keeping his eye open for the solid rock that he had a mind to anchor to.

He whirled sideways, a woman's hand sliding off his cock, and found himself face to face with a wide-eyed Anderson, who wrapped his arms around C.J.'s neck and clung, their erect, aroused bodies pressed together like pillars of granite.

C.J.'s hands moved up to his shoulders, soothing him, gentling him, feeling Anderson's body quiver like a piano wire from overwhelmed arousal. He lowered his head and put his lips close to Anderson's ear, feeling the heat of Anderson's body spread over his skin when Anderson's hips twitched even closer to his own.

"You doing okay?" he asked, and Anderson's hands slid down his shoulders, insinuated themselves under C.J.'s arms, and grabbed C.J.'s ass.

"I'd be doing better alone with you!" he shouted, and C.J. shook his head, feeling used. He looked up and realized that they were close enough to the edge of the dance floor, and that he'd better take that opening or he'd end up in the very center, where all the bodies were bare and most of them were lubricated.

"I've got to get out of here!" he hollered, and broke away from Anderson, plowing through that press of bodies and hands without any finesse whatsoever.

He broke through, feeling the cool splash of air on his face when the body heat was no longer suffocating, and waved to his sister from across the room, pointing to himself and then the exit. She looked surprised and was probably even more so when he took off running. His body was trembling with arousal, his heart aching with untold needing for the young, damaged person who had just tried to seduce him in that press of bodies.

He was fit, and driven, and he started sprinting down the corridor, keeping to one side like the people who ran along the rim for exercise, setting up a steady pace that would keep him going until he reached his quarters and could use the shower or the fresher or a wash cloth and get rid of the smell of other people's sex and the erection that hungered for one touch and one touch only.

He ran the same way he'd strained his shoulder swimming—like he was trying to get away from something. He was so focused on getting the hell out of there that he didn't hear Anderson's winded voice until he'd already turned off of the spoke and was halfway down the outer hub to his quarters.

"C.J.! C.J., dammit, slow down!"

C.J. kept going for a couple of paces, because quite frankly, he felt too fucked up to answer that plea. He was a man, and he wanted... wanted so bad. The hell of it was, Anderson wanted him back, and the bogeyman of “should” was less and less frightening, less and less of a reason to hold back, and C.J. was surrounded by the siren song of “could,” and right now... oh, right now, the things he could do to that pliant, sweet body....

“Cyril John, dammit! Slow down! Ceeeeeeee Jaaaaaaayyy, *please!*”

Fuck. Aw, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

C.J. whirled on his heel and looked at Anderson in exasperation, which was his best alternative to blazing fury and come-fuck-me lust. “What, Anderson? What do you want now? You were *surrounded* by people who would have done you right there. Why did you need me? I’m the one person on the whole fucking station who *can’t* fuck you because it’s *wrong*. Why do you have to play this fucking game!”

Anderson caught up to him, holding his side and panting, while he glared up at C.J. with raw fury. “It’s not a game!”

“I can’t do this!”

“Why not!” Anderson demanded, catching his breath enough to stand straight and mash his chest into C.J.’s in honest confrontation.

“Anderson—*God*.” C.J. ran his hand over his head and tried not to cry. “I’m a bad pick, man. I’m a buddy—it’s probably the whole reason Cassie let you stay with me. I’m a *friend*. You can trust me, I’m as loyal as a fucking gamma bird, but you don’t want me for a lover. You... you’re *not* in a place right now where picking a lover for forever is going to do you much good!”

Anderson’s anger cranked down a notch, and a hard version of his predator’s smile twitched at his lips. “Who said anything about forever?” he purred, and C.J. dropped any pretenses of having the upper hand and just slouched against the beige wall that made up the side of the hub. Far out there, through two feet of vacuum-enforced steel, was open space. Cool, brutal, without oxygen or remorse, and for a moment, C.J. wished he was out there, too, floating like space debris, serene and compassless and without pain.

“I did, Anderson. Man... I’m in love with you. I’m... I’m rock-off-the-cliffs-of-Emerald-overlook in fucking love with you. And you’re not ready. That little stunt you pulled in there? That was all kid, Anderson, and you get to be a kid, okay? You shouldn’t have to worry about my bullshit, because I knew better. I *know* you’re not ready. I saw... God, I saw what you lived through, and I don’t

even *want* you to be ready. I want you to go out and play, and have some guilt-free fun, and just... you know. Go to school, get a job, have other options than the first flunky who greeted you when you got off the boat. But I'm shredded. I'm aching and bleeding and shredded. I know you lived it, and I know you're way more fucked up than I am, but I got to watch you live it, and every frame, every hit, every moment of fucking pain was one more reason I should *not* be sleeping in your bed to comfort you, and one more reason I should *not* wear that shit you're buying me to mark me, and one more reason I should *not* let you keep trying to seduce me!"

Anderson's eyes were luminous now, resting on C.J.'s face like he carried the goddamned light of the fucking universe in his heart. "You love me," he murmured, and C.J. groaned. God, he really did.

"And that's why I have to say no," C.J. muttered. His heart wasn't in it, but Christ, he was trying.

"That's why you have to say yes!" Anderson countered. "You don't get it! I was out there in that crowd, and I was thinking, 'If you humidify the skin to X degree and send a slight current along the outer edge, you can reproduce the feeling of this hand along my abdomen, this body against my back, this touch along my face. If you institute an algorithm for motion, air, sound, and sight, you can reproduce the feeling of being here, and you'd never know, ever know, ever know that this wasn't real, and you could dance here, get your cock sucked here, get fucked into the ground here to the music and the lights forever and forever and forever....'"

C.J.'s heart wanted to explode. "It was *real*!" he shouted. "It was all *real*! None of those people were holograms, they were *people*—"

"The only one who felt real to me was *you*!"

CJ. closed his eyes and backed up against the wall. "That's why this is bad," he whispered. "I can't be your only option."

Anderson was suddenly close enough for C.J. to feel his body heat, close enough to feel the pillowy lips tracing his jaw, a breath away from nuzzling the hollow of his neck. *Ah, God....*

"I know you're not the only option," Anderson murmured back. His breath tickled the inside of C.J.'s ear, and C.J. couldn't help it. He shuddered, his almost instant erection aching. Anderson felt the shudder, insinuated himself closer, flickered his tongue along C.J.'s lips and then pulled away when C.J. opened his mouth in spite of his very best intentions.

“You’re the best option,” Anderson said into C.J.’s other ear, and C.J.’s knees went weak. It was wrong, and twisted, and C.J. wanted it oh-so-bad.

“Anderson....” It was a plea, but not even C.J. knew whether it was a plea to stop or to keep going. It didn’t matter. Anderson had made his own decisions for ten plus years, and he made this one.

This time when his tongue teased C.J.’s lips, C.J. opened his mouth, allowing Anderson’s tongue inside. Anderson took C.J.’s face in his hands, deepening the kiss, pushing forward until their bodies were mashed together and C.J.’s carefully constructed levee of restraint crumbled to dust and desire.

He pulled back from the kiss, took Anderson’s face in *his* hands, and whirled, pushing Anderson up against the slightly concave wall and taking his mouth with all of the passion and fury he’d been crushing back.

Anderson tasted dark and bright, smoky and clean, like fear and aggression and the sweet, powerful kick of the fruit juice and alcohol he’d consumed before jumping into the dance mob. C.J. took his mouth, took everything Anderson had been offering him for two months, ground his crotch against Anderson’s hip and groaned.

Anderson ground back, kissed back, groaned into his mouth and begged. His hands started fumbling with C.J.’s tank, pushing it up past the midriff, and C.J. pulled back and gulped air.

“Room,” he panted. “We’re like... four doors down....”

Anderson groaned and thrust his hips against C.J.’s thigh; his cock was rampant and erect under his tight bodysuit. “If you chicken out on me,” he rasped, “I’ll never forgive you.”

C.J. could barely see, he needed so badly. “No,” he muttered. “No.”

He grabbed Anderson’s hand then and turned blindly toward the dark blue door on the other side of the beige corridor. They sprinted, and C.J. held his hand up to the vacuum lock panel with so much shaking impatience that it took longer than usual to recognize his palm print and open the door. Anderson used the time to stand on tiptoe and suckle C.J.’s earlobe, and C.J. was almost insane by the time the familiar “swoosh” echoed down the corridor.

They fell into the apartment, kissing hard, their hands rough and clumsy on each other’s bodies. It didn’t matter—every brush of Anderson’s hands on C.J.’s skin made C.J. gasp, and C.J. was *starving* for the feel of Anderson’s flesh under his palms.

Anderson managed to strip off C.J.'s pants first and, to C.J.'s surprise, fell to his knees, placing raw, open-mouthed kisses down C.J.'s chest and then his abdomen as he went. His palms, skating over C.J.'s thighs, were practically teasing, but that was the only tease that Anderson had in him. He grasped C.J.'s cock in his hand and stroked, and C.J. threw his head back, seeking something, anything, to hold him up. He found the doorframe between the front room and the bedroom and leaned against that, and then Anderson said his name.

He looked down and saw Anderson's eyes, fathomless in the unlit room, intent on his face.

"You've seen the recordings," Anderson asked insistently, and C.J. nodded, feeling inarticulate and frenzied. "If you've seen them, you know I didn't do this very often," Anderson hissed, and then he opened his mouth and swallowed C.J. all the way to the root, groaning when his lips brushed C.J.'s curly ash-blond hair.

A sound, half growl, half sob, tore out of C.J.'s chest as Anderson moaned around his cock and then tightened his lips and pulled back.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God ohgodohgodohgodohgod... Anderson!"

C.J. started to spurt come, just a little, and he grabbed Anderson's hair and pulled him away to keep him from bringing C.J. to a quick, painful climax.

"Want... inside you," C.J. grunted, and Anderson looked up and bared his teeth in anticipation.

"Want that too," Anderson growled. "And then I want inside *you*. Can we do that? Can I fuck you back?"

"Auughhhh...." C.J. had to pinch off the end of his prick, bringing the foreskin over it and clamping down, or he would have come right there. "Clothes off," he commanded/begged. "There's lube in the drawer. Get yourself ready for me, Anderson. I need to see you want it."

C.J. managed to calm himself down a little while he stripped out of his clothes and his shoes, but that was only because he didn't watch Anderson take off *his* clothes. When C.J. got to the bed and Anderson was on his hands and knees, that fine, pale body gleaming softly in the ambient light from computer console, C.J. had to breathe hard and deliberately to not simply stroke himself once and come.

God, Anderson was beautiful.

He was still thin, but two months of swimming had left his muscles

defined, his waist slightly indented, his bottom with just enough flesh to not be uncomfortable as C.J. *slammed into his asshole*, which was all C.J. wanted to do.

Lubricant was slathered over Anderson's ass cheeks, in his crease, and, as C.J. watched, was being pushed into Anderson's entrance with two scissoring, stretching fingers, even as a drop or two slithered off his testicles and onto the mattress.

C.J. whined a little, needing, and then said, "Turn around, Anderson. I want to see your face."

Anderson shuddered and turned onto his back, spreading his knees and grabbing a pillow from the top of the bed and shoving it under his hips. "You don't ask much," he protested, even as he reached behind his back and put his fingers back into his asshole, shivering with pleasure and want as he did so.

"Stop that," C.J. murmured. "I'll do that." He came forward and palmed the flesh (lightly covered with blond hair) of Anderson's thighs, then lowered his head to kiss the inside of Anderson's knee. Anderson gasped, and C.J. chuckled thinly.

"I may be a horny bastard, Anderson, but God, I've been dreaming about this...." His voice trailed off, and he kissed his way down the inside of Anderson's thigh to the crease of his body. He wanted to take Anderson's testicles delicately into his mouth, but there was already lube on them, so he pulled away and, instead, traced a line up between them to the veiny, ridged surface of that impressive, thick cock.

"Don't make me come," Anderson pleaded. "I want to be inside you...."

C.J. took him inside his mouth and swallowed the salty taste of pre-come in the back of his throat, pulling Anderson's foreskin back with his fist. He let Anderson shudder hard in ecstasy and then sucked, hard, and pulled his lips up, wet and sloppy, so that Anderson would be tormented by the feel of the cool air around the exposed pink skin bared around his crown.

"Anderson... God, as much as I want you, do you really think you're only going to come once tonight?"

Anderson smiled, and it was a triumphant, feral thing. "Please, C.J... please fuck me right the hell now!"

C.J. positioned himself carefully—he wanted it to be good, smooth, not too tight, not too rough, and the muscles in his back bunched in control as he slid in. Stretch, stretch stretch... *pop!* The head of C.J.'s cock disappeared, and Anderson spread his knees as far as they would go and cocked his hips and

groaned.

“God, Cyril, *please!*”

C.J. spoke through clenched teeth. “Don’t... call... me... Cyril...,” he ordered, every word another inch into Anderson’s body.

“*C.J.! Please!*” Anderson begged, and C.J. couldn’t stand another moment and snapped his hips forward, almost weeping when Anderson closed his eyes, tilted his head back and screamed, “*Oh, damn, yesssss!*” into the sweaty darkness around them.

C.J. pulled out of his body again and then snapped forward, and Anderson reached between them and begged some more. “Can I... God... forget what I said... can I... please... oh God, I need to come... please?”

C.J. slammed home again and then started a brutal, pounding rhythm, panting, “Anything you want, baby, bring yourself off... all I need is to see you come. It’s got to be good... please tell me it’s good!”

“So... damned... good... *auuughhhhh!*”

The hot spatter of Anderson’s spend splashing on their stomachs, coating them, tinting the air around them with the sharp smell of come, was all it took. C.J.’s thrusts grew frenzied, and now he was the one begging.

“Please, Anderson, please can I, God can I, I just need to... please, please, please....”

“*God, C.J., come!*”

C.J.’s whole body felt like it was exploding in white, and the light behind his clenched-tight-shut eyes was brilliant, tinged in red, as he came so hard his balls ached fiercely with each shudder and spurt into Anderson’s clenching body.

He let out a cry that hardly sounded human and buried his face in Anderson’s neck and made that sound again. Anderson pulled his hands, one of them sticky, up to C.J.’s shoulder and stroked and whispered and soothed, even as C.J.’s cock grew flaccid and slid out of Anderson’s well-used backside.

He groaned at the loss of contact and then pulled his head back and kissed Anderson again, loving his taste, dying for it still, and Anderson kissed back the same way.

This time was slower, more civilized, with more exploring. C.J. kissed shoulders, collarbones, and took the time to see what would happen if he scraped the flat, tiny pink nipples with his teeth. Anderson almost screamed and came off the bed, it felt so good—*that* was what happened! Anderson licked his way

down C.J.'s side, under his arm, and when C.J. protested, "I'm stinky," Anderson looked at him soberly.

"I know. It's human, C.J. It's wonderful."

C.J. whined then, because Anderson's tongue on the curve of his underarm would have tickled if it was daylight, if they were playing, if there was anything light and easy about their bodies touching in the darkness. There wasn't. There was no play, there was no giggling, there was none of the laughter or the kidding that C.J. had known with his other lovers. This thing they were doing, it was deadly serious, and C.J. thought hazily, as Anderson cleaned off his cock with a questioning mouth, that tomorrow, they would have time to play. Tomorrow, they would make love again in the morning, and C.J. would teach him how much fun it would be, but now, they just needed, just wanted, just *needed so fucking bad!* That every touch was desperation, desire, arousal to the point of pain.

Anderson pushed between C.J.'s thighs, spreading them, shoving the pillow under C.J.'s hips and taking the lubricant from where it had been dropped on the bed.

"I've never done this part before," he explained, his breath tickling the fine dark hairs all points south of C.J.'s cock.

"Lots of lube," C.J. muttered. "One finger, not deep... two... *oh Christ, yes!* Just like you did with yourself... but... yeah... deeper...."

"I know what's deeper, C.J.," Anderson said, sounding very sober. His fingers inside C.J.'s body were throwing everything into chaos. C.J. *loved* being fucked, *loved* being the bottom, and Anderson's touch was sure and commanding and everything C.J. could plead for in a lover. Anderson scissored his fingers, spreading them and then putting them together and pushing up until....

"*That's deeper!*" C.J. yelped, and Anderson pushed on it again and again and again until now C.J. was begging. "Please! Dammit, Anderson, I wasn't trying to torture... God, yes!" Because Anderson had risen on his knees, a slender, commanding god, about to claim C.J. as his home planet.

His cock was big enough to make stretching a question and not a certainty, and C.J. had to struggle to breathe... breathe... breathe. He closed his eyes and saw a planetary ring of fire like the one his stretched anus had become, and then.... "Yessssss...." The head of Anderson's prick popped in, and now C.J. was the one being hammered, fucked, *pounded* into oblivion, while Anderson's once

sweet, wide-eyed face, twisted fiercely with the snarl of a predator, and C.J. died and died and died again while being impaled on his body.

Anderson closed his eyes with his final lunge, and C.J. had been convulsing in climax around his cock steadily for quite some time. C.J. was exhausted by then, orgasmed past pleasure and into pain and still wanting more, but he watched the peace stealing across Anderson's features when he closed his eyes, set down his burdens, and released into C.J.'s body.

Anderson fell forward, and this time, it was C.J. whispering into his hair, C.J. saying soothing nonsense words, C.J. telling him softly that he was loved.

Anderson rolled off of C.J.'s body, and they lay still, their ferocious heat cooling slightly when they were no longer touching, and C.J. turned his head to look into Anderson's eyes.

Anderson was curled on his side, and he clasped C.J.'s hand in his as they both panted in the darkness and tried to find words, any words.

"Thank you, C.J.," Anderson mumbled, obviously exhausted. "Thank you."

"I love you, Anderson," C.J. said, wanting that to be between them as well as the sex. But Anderson didn't say the words back, and C.J. guessed that maybe he wasn't ready, and that was C.J.'s fault for not waiting.

"Thank you, C.J. Thank you. For the first time in forever, I'm real."

C.J. was falling, falling, falling asleep. He reached out for a moment and stroked Anderson's hair. "You're real," he whispered. "You're real to me."

THEY were both hot and sweaty and covered in the mess that came with sex, even as they fell asleep. C.J. woke up a little later, surprised to find Anderson was wiping him off, his pubic area, his backside, his stomach where he'd come when Anderson had been inside him.

"Let me return the favor," he mumbled.

"Later," Anderson murmured back. "Later. I'll be back. You can do it then."

"Where're you going?" C.J. asked, not even able to keep his eyes open.

"Just to get some fruit juice. Shhhh...."

C.J. fell asleep then, God help him. Fell fast asleep. Anderson returned to

their bed much later, and C.J. reached around to clasp him around the middle. Anderson whimpered, like the action hurt, but scooted back into C.J.'s embrace the way he'd been doing since the very beginning.

"I love you, C.J.," he whispered.

"Love you too," C.J. said back, loving how tightly they fit when there wasn't anything between them.

Anderson must have fallen asleep then.

An hour later, he woke up in time to scream.

This time, the screams weren't silent—the raw, keening screech of them blasted around the space station with the force to shatter planets and turn asteroid fields to dust. And they never, never stopped.

Part 3: Anderson

Chapter 15

Two Keystrokes, Three Hits, and One Big Loss

ANDERSON almost didn't follow through on what he had to do because he couldn't stop looking at C.J.

God, he looked so vulnerable, lying face down, naked, the chocolate and cream color of his skin gleaming lustrous and touchable. His hand was still stretched out from reaching to touch Anderson's face, and Anderson closed his eyes and relived that tickle down his cheekbone.

Real.

Anderson had read and re-read every scrap of fiction in the archives. He'd started to memorize the things he loved the most before he deleted them to make room for the holodeck, thinking that if he lived, the words would at least live in his mind—what was left of it, anyway. His vocabulary was extensive, encyclopedic, in truth, but in spite of that, he could not find a better word for the feel of C.J.'s flesh against his hands, against his chest and his thighs, surrounding his cock, invading his body. It was all *real*.

It was real in a way that Anderson hadn't been sure existed, not even after he walked down the plank of the shuttle and was introduced to other people for the first time in ten and a half years.

He could remember Cassie's warmth and Marshall's exotic, steady kindness, but those had seemed distant and far away. Nice to imagine, but not necessarily real. A new program, instituted by Bobby and Kate, perhaps? Henry and Risa helped? It was possible. His forebrain knew it was what happened, but his instinct, the one who had lived with his own dreams for nearly as long as

he'd lived with his flesh and blood family, was not so sure.

C.J., though. C.J. was like nothing he had imagined. His looks were striking, and then they were seductive. The light green eyes in the dark-skinned face had made Anderson want to look, and look again, and keep on looking. Seeing that cream and chocolate colored skin every morning as C.J. had emerged from the shower had been... wonderful.

But even that might have only been Anderson's imagination, if it hadn't been for the touch, the warmth, the *smell* of him, every day, every night, as they'd shared quarters, shared interest, shared *lives*.

Anderson understood C.J.'s concerns in that same distant, untouched way that he understood that Cassie and Marshall weren't holograms.

Of *course* there were other people to love out there. He'd seen that on board the ship. A guy didn't just fall for the first person, no matter *how* available, in the same way he hadn't fallen for Alex or Henry or Peter or... whatever that other guy's name had been.

Anderson had looked. While C.J. had been watching Anderson's life for the past ten years, Anderson had been trying, in fits and starts, to imagine what his life would be in the future. He'd smiled at men as he'd gone shopping, attempted to flirt with them, even accepted invitations for coffee at the nearest kiosk. He hadn't told C.J. about this; these moments seemed... hallucinatory. The men had not seemed real. Their hands on his knee had seemed like electric currents and wind. His polite refusal to see them again or to visit their quarters felt as detached, as impersonal, as a decision not to watch a video he'd seen too often, or, more likely, had no interest in seeing at all.

But not C.J. Coming back to C.J.'s quarters had felt, every day, to be more and more like the shuttle, except better, because in a million years Anderson wouldn't have put all of those eclectic, harmonizing, rich and lustrous colors together in the same place. C.J. *must* be real, or his home on board the station wouldn't have felt like such a haven. C.J.'s smile, his big, goofy, don't-take-anything-seriously smile, had put Anderson at ease on his first day at the station. By the third day, it had started butterflies in Anderson's stomach. By the thirtieth, watching C.J. smile, knowing that smile was waiting for him in the morning when they woke up side by side or when his physical therapy was over, it became an obsession. A thing he must have.

It was another way Anderson knew he was real.

Watching that smile die in this past month had been another thing for

which to hate Alpha. Anderson, who had spoken the math of emotions for the preceding ten years, had worked out the simple equation. If Anderson = C.J. smiling < Alpha = C.J. *not* smiling, then the only way to eliminate the bad half of the equation was to zero out Alpha.

It was really very, very simple.

Planetside, stationside, it didn't matter. Anderson wanted C.J. He *needed* C.J. in order to feel real and not like a rapidly disintegrating program of data bits directing air currents and electricity into motion. Without C.J., Anderson was a series of ones and zeroes, polarized by magnetic interference, a blank screen. Alpha made C.J. unhappy. It was *Alpha* who had made C.J. not want Anderson for the past two months. *Alpha* who had made C.J. think that Anderson wasn't well enough, wasn't emotionally healthy enough, for a relationship to flourish.

Alpha had been created for Anderson in desperation. C.J. simply loved him. There really was no other option.

First, Anderson cleaned up that fine, fit, limp body, marveling that the sweat and the fluids and the detritus of sex remained even when the act was complete. This was something he hadn't known. It wasn't often mentioned in the romance books—although “clean up” was mentioned, exactly what was being cleaned was not.

It was more than just the fluids, though. Anderson didn't feel worthy yet. He didn't want C.J. to carry his mark, to wear his scent, or to be soiled with his touch—not yet. Not when Anderson was still clinging to the dirty part of his soul.

Anderson had some natural fiber knit pajama bottoms, and he slid those on without putting on any underwear. He thought about going shirtless—hell, he *thought* about going naked—but he hadn't wandered around naked on his shuttle, and he wasn't going to wander around naked here. Instead, he put on a knit shirt, one of C.J.'s that hadn't been cleaned yet, so it *smelled* like him, sweaty and earnest and kind, and went padding down the taupe station corridors in the pleasant hum of the down shift, which was what the station residents called the quiet hours when only the maintenance crew was working. (The entire station, including the hub, pretended to have a three-shift day, in rough approximation to the planet below them. C.J. had explained that the routine and the rhythm made living on the station easier and less of an acclimation than keeping the things fully staffed constantly, and that made the crew more productive.)

So Anderson saw few people in the corridors, and those he did see seemed to think it was perfectly normal for a grown man—and he was now, wasn't he? Grown? People certainly seemed to treat him as grown—to be padding down the corridor in his pajamas and bare feet. Maybe he needed a drink from one of the few open kiosks. Maybe a midnight snack? Maybe he had quick personal business with a friend who was on shift. It didn't matter, Anderson thought smugly. What mattered was that no one paid him attention. He was normal. Perfectly normal.

There was a night crew in the bridge of his shuttle—he hadn't anticipated that. But the lie to the two techs who were making sure the archival footage transfer for the day had been complete came smoothly.

"C.J. had a question for one of the holos," he told them, reminding himself that the techs were real and might know a lie if they heard one. "I was up, so I thought I'd ask."

They two women shrugged, and Anderson's uneasy look was completely genuine. "Uhm, it's sort of a private question?" he hedged, and he almost felt guilty at how readily the two women smiled sympathetically and nodded. Did he look as though he'd just had a night of debauchery? For the first time in his life, Anderson was in a position where other people did not expect to know about his sex life. It was disconcerting, at the very least—and a sudden, jarring confirmation that other people were real.

It didn't matter. They were gone.

Cautiously, Kate, Bobby, Henry, and Risa advanced onto the bridge from the house. When they saw the night techs were gone, they surrounded him, talking, laughing, and hugging him excitedly.

Anderson hugged them back.

He'd been on the bridge before since they'd docked, many times, in fact. But this was the first time he went with the new consciousness of what was real and what was not.

He was semi-surprised to find that his friends were real.

"You smell like cinnamon," he said to Kate, and she blushed to the roots of her hair, which was long enough now to put in a ponytail.

"We've been going through the archives and resources here at the station," she said shyly, looking at Bobby, who grinned. "They have scents for rooms and people that they didn't have at the mining colony. We've, uhm, been busy."

Bobby wagged his eyebrows, and she giggled—hard, practical Kate actually *giggled*, and Anderson felt something in his chest loosen. They were real. They were growing, learning, improving upon what he'd given them. Within their context, they *were* real.

Good. Good. He knew he was crazy, but he wasn't entirely crazy. He had created real people.

He had also created a monster.

"How's Alpha?" he asked into the chatter, and there was sudden silence.

"Worse than ever," Henry said, because he was the friend who would say the things no one wanted to hear. "He... well, none of the crew has seen, but then, I think C.J. and Cassie are the only ones who know how bad things were." He shrugged. "He leaves us alone, but... they don't know it, but he's been watching over their shoulder when they've viewed the tapes."

"Ick," Risa said succinctly, and then looked sorry she'd spoken.

Anderson smiled softly at her, his lips quirked and crooked, and she quirked her lips back. He'd been surprised, at first, that the blunt-spoken, boisterous Henry had picked, of all the students in their class, the gentle, awkward Risa, but over the years, Anderson had come to love her. She didn't speak much, but what she did say was often funny and to the point. Her self-consciousness was often, Anderson thought, because she was processing more than other people—she was filtering what she thought she should say from all of the data she *wanted* to spew.

In this case, "ick" was a singularly appropriate word.

"I'm sorry C.J. had to see that," he told them, because they loved him and he could.

"It hurt...." Bobby's eyes darted to Kate. "It hurt us all, but, Anderson, I don't think C.J. is going to be the same. I mean... whatever you two are to each other, could you be careful with him? Could you, maybe... I know. Just don't be too... just take things slow. He hurts."

Anderson's stomach congealed. C.J. was hurt. Anderson blamed Alpha. Anderson was going to have to take care of that.

"Guys," he said hesitantly, "uh... I may have to go."

There was a chorus of consternation, and Anderson felt it, a terrible ache of loss from the hole they would leave when he was gone from them.

"C.J. and I are going planetside for a while," he said. "We're...."

Something broke in his chest, something that might never be repaired. It was like a guy-line in a spiderweb, and he felt the rest of the web tighten, adjust, grow weak with the bad tension, from that one break.

“We’re going,” he said again, wondering why it was so hard to breathe. “But... there’s something I’ve got to do first.” He turned and walked to the bridge console and called up two programs. The others looked over his shoulder and gasped.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Kate asked hesitantly. “I mean... Anderson...”

“The second one I like,” Bobby said, reaching for the button for the two keystrokes. Anderson smacked his hand away. “Man, let me do that, and ignore the first part, okay?”

Anderson shook his head. “He needs to know why.”

“He should *know* why!” Henry half laughed in shock. “He’s a fuckheaded asshole fucker....”

“You said ‘fuck’ twice, sweetheart,” Risa said shyly, and Henry grimaced.

“Okay, there is no word bad enough for him,” Henry muttered, and Risa nodded in agreement. She could see that.

“This is dangerous,” Bobby said starkly. “Anderson—in a year, maybe, but not now!”

In a year? C.J. was young, he had friends, he had a life. Why would C.J. wait a year for Anderson to be free, for him to be whole and well and happy?

“I don’t want to wait a year,” Anderson mumbled, and then, “Shit!”

“What?” Kate asked worriedly, and then looked over his shoulder. “Oh... oh shit. Anderson!”

Anderson’s hands shook, and he had to blink his eyes two or three times. Oh God. What if he hadn’t checked that?

“Kate, double-check what I entered there. Bobby, you too. Jesus, how did that happen?”

“He did it,” Kate muttered. “This has Alpha’s signature all the hell over it. There. There, that’s right. Bobby, come make sure this is right.”

Bobby looked at what Anderson had entered and then looked at what had been there first. “Oh, double-fuck us all!”

“What?” Henry asked. “Can the kids who don’t program know this one

too?”

Anderson, Kate, and Bobby all looked at him with tense expressions. “He was trying to kill us,” Kate muttered, and then quietly said, “He may have succeeded.”

Anderson looked at her, that tension cranking up a notch. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t be sure he didn’t tie this action together on a deeper level, Anderson. He had it set so that if you turned off his program, you deleted *all* of us—”

“*Deleted!*” squealed Risa, and Kate looked at her apologetically.

“Yeah, deleted. Any action that would render Alpha inactive would have completely erased us all, even our memory in the holodeck, now that it’s been accessed and recorded as data.”

The fruity drink Anderson had downed before he’d jumped into the dance mob threatened to come up. It was a near thing, and his throat burned with the force of it. “I shouldn’t do this,” he said after a moment, his head suddenly hurting and his hands freezing in their own clammy sweat.

“Yes, you should,” Kate hissed, and Bobby looked at her with indignation.

“But Kate! You just said—”

“I don’t care!” She seized Bobby’s hand in her own and held it to her face. “I mean I do—do you think I’d want to give up sentience, give up this moment here, holding your hand? I know what you *smell* like, Bobby. I know that Risa is going to say something to me to make me laugh when we go inside, and I know that you and Henry are going to call up those horrible videos that the station has that make me wish we were still stuck with the same old shit. I *know* that we’re just holograms, baby, but I *feel* real. Do you think I want to die?”

“You don’t have to,” Anderson said weakly. “You were right. This was a bad idea.”

“No, *you* were right,” Kate said, all fierceness, and Anderson saw Bobby squeeze her hand and then raise it to his lips in a time-honored gesture of solidarity and love. “You need him out of your life, Anderson. If that means the rest of us have to go—”

“I can’t....” There were spots dancing in front of his eyes. “If there’s even a little bit of uncertainty—”

“*You fucking coward!*”

The roar was unmistakable, and they all turned from the bridge console to the unlikely construct of the front door of their little one-story home, sitting right behind the seat units of the bridge. Alpha was standing there, bare-chested, panting, his once lean, handsome face ripped back in a primal snarl.

“Guys, he’s not safe,” Anderson muttered. He’d written them like people, and it had never been discussed, but Alpha could kill them the same way he could kill Anderson. Once, he’d bruised Risa’s wrist by grabbing her too tightly to move her out of his way. The bruise had lasted on her skin as it had on Anderson’s. Anderson did not even question that Alpha could snap poor Risa’s neck with one crack of his hard, thick hands.

“Anderson!” Kate hissed, and Anderson put both hands on her shoulders and shoved. She felt warm under his hands, and he didn’t question the air-current-electricity velocity-humidity matrix that it took to make her feel like that. She was simply his friend, and she could be putting her life in jeopardy—they *all* could, just by staying there.

“Get out!” he ordered, his face assuming that remembered seat of command. “I’ll take care of him, and I won’t let him hurt you guys.”

“Anderson, you have a life now!” Bobby snapped. “Don’t give it up for us!”

“You’re my friends!” he told them as Alpha sneered at them all. “Now go!” He managed to touch hands with them as they left, even Risa’s frightened, rabbit-like touch and Henry’s brief, pragmatic clasp. They all glared at Alpha, and then, to his surprise, shoved past him, even Risa, although her shoulder barely came up to his ribcage. He made to shove at her—his hand came up, and Anderson snapped, “Don’t you want to talk first, Alpha?”

As he spoke, his finger was over the computer symbol that would delete his savior, his lover, his nemesis, from the ship’s memory, from the holodeck, from existence, forever.

“Christ, no!” Alpha sneered. “God, Anderson, are you going to kill us all like a man or talk us to death?!”

“Not everyone,” Anderson said with more confidence than he felt. Oh God. His friends. His family. The little pieces of himself, the best ones, the kindest ones, the parts with the self-sacrifice and the tenderness—he couldn’t let them go, not even to rid himself of Alpha. Feverishly, he checked his programming directions again. Two keystrokes. That was all it should take.

“Not so sure, are you, Anderson?” Alpha taunted, walking closer.

Physically, Alpha *could* venture onto the bridge—otherwise, C.J.’s sister wouldn’t have been at risk. But mentally... Anderson had ordered him to stay away. He’d threatened to keep him away with programming—“cheating,” as he called it, but he’d meant it. Alpha was volatile—what if he’d decided to eliminate the other programs while they were in transit? What if he’d decided to kill the entire holodeck? Anderson had exacted a promise—and Kate and Bobby had assured him that this was one programming requirement that would hold—that Alpha would only go on the bridge in an emergency.

Apparently, watching Anderson be comforted by C.J. that first night back in port had counted as an emergency.

So did goading Anderson to murder.

“Look at you!” Alpha taunted. “So afraid of making the wrong decision you can’t even save your own goddamned skin! I don’t know what sort of future you have here. You’ll never be anything but a scared goddamned rabbit. No wonder you don’t want to kill me. I’m the only option you’ve got!”

“*Bullshit!*” Anderson snapped, seeing red. He stepped away from the hologram console, away from the two keystrokes that would rid him of Alpha for the rest of his life.

“Yeah? You’ve got somewhere else to be, Anderson? If you had someone else, you’d be there!”

Anderson shuddered, feeling C.J.’s warmth and kindness, his terrifying passion, sliding off of Anderson’s skin like oil from water. “I was there,” he whispered. He swallowed, feeling braver. “Can you smell, Alpha? I never asked.”

Alpha’s expression hardened. “Going there, Anderson? You haven’t sunk to the ‘you’re not real’ argument yet. I thought you were above that.”

Anderson shook his head and crossed his arms in front of him, trying to hold C.J.’s words around his shoulders like a cloak. “I’m not asking if you’re real, Aaron—I’m asking if you can smell. Whoever you are, whatever you are, do you detect scent?”

Those eyes—they were like ice-chips. They had been meant to be pretty, winsome gray, but not now. “Yes,” came the wooden answer. “This hologram can smell. Why?”

Anderson walked up to him, thinking, *I am not afraid tonight. I have known what real is. He is not real.* “Can you smell him?” Anderson asked, standing on his tiptoes so that the hollow of his neck was exposed, and a man, a

real man, could smell sex and sweat from the warmth of a lover's skin. "Can you? I had his cock in my mouth, and he came. That's his come down my chin. Can you smell him?"

Alpha's eyes were closed in something like pain. Good. "Something like" very nearly was. "Good for you. You got laid. Feel good, Anderson? Are you proud of yourself, you little slut? I bet you begged for it. Did you beg for it, the way you used to? I bet you couldn't wait to spread your ass and beg."

"I never begged you," Anderson said softly, with dignity. "I never begged you, not the way I begged him. And then you know what?"

Alpha kept his face impassive, and not once did he deign to make eye contact. "Thrill me."

Anderson's voice dropped to a whisper. "Then *he* begged me."

Alpha's eyes widened, and Anderson knew he'd scored a hit. "Yeah. I'm dripping with him," Anderson whispered. Alpha's body was radiating heat (X amount of electricity, with Y velocity + air current = energy = micro-joules), and a pulse in his neck was beating hard and fast. "He's slipping down between my thighs. Can you taste, Alpha? Could you taste him? Because your come, that just disappeared, didn't it? Even when you sprayed it on my *face*!" That last word was pure venom, and Anderson cursed himself—it was hard to have the upper hand when you revealed a soul that burned with shame.

"You enjoyed that," Alpha gloated, but his eyes were moving sideways, and Anderson slunk right out of his peripheral vision and behind him.

"No." This was true. Anderson had thought that he must have—he kept allowing it to happen, didn't he? But... but that wasn't the way it had been. It wasn't. When Anderson thought of those last years on the ship, it all seemed so... tight. Like a pressure cooker. Alpha was the steam valve, venting their fears, their frustrations, their sorrow, their anger, on the person who deserved it most.

Anderson *did* deserve it. He knew that, no matter what C.J. said. But that didn't mean he enjoyed it. That didn't mean it was right.

"Lie to me some more," Alpha snarled. "I *like* it."

"I didn't." Anderson allowed his lips to brush Alpha's ear as he said it, emerging from behind his shoulder, placing a provocative fingertip under Alpha's jaw. "I didn't like it. Any of it. I didn't like the violence, or the violation, or the pain. You can say all sorts of stuff about the way things became between us, but you can't say I liked it. And that's why I have to do this."

Alpha's lip curled. "Delete me? You pissy-anty fucking man-cunt. You don't have the *balls*."

Anderson tipped his hand then—he admitted it. He allowed Alpha to see the intention in his eyes as he took a step toward the console, where his intentions were laid out bare and plain, in two. Simple. Keystrokes.

"You can't!" And for the first time, there was real panic in his voice. "You can't *do* that, Anderson. What about all of your high and mighty fucking morals? Wouldn't that be *cheating*?" The contempt in that last word was nauseating.

Anderson swallowed his bile and shook his head. "No," he said, his voice shaky but clear. "It would be murder. Just like you kept saying it was. It's murder. But this time, it's to keep the others safe. This time, it's in self-defense."

"Self-defense?" Alpha took a step toward Anderson and a step toward his right, trying to insinuate himself between Anderson and the keyboard. Anderson countered and allowed a little bit of triumph in his expression when Alpha scowled. "Don't you mean self-mutilation?"

Anderson's sweat chilled against his skin, congealed in his stomach, seeped into the fissures of his soul and froze solid, making the empty places wide and vulnerable. "I'm not you," he said, but the idea... the thought that it was true. He was a shudder away from throwing up.

And Alpha saw it. "Don't tell me you haven't figured it out yet, Anderson. We're *all* you! Don't you get it? Poow widdo baby, locked all away, made up some imaginary friends to play with, and they were *all him*. What's the word? Come on, Anderson, you read every scrap of material in the entire fucking ship... don't tell me there wasn't a psych manual somewhere on the records. What's the word?"

"Projection," Anderson mumbled, remembering the book Alpha was talking about.

"Say it *louder*!"

"*Projection!*" Anderson shouted. "And I don't care if it's true. It doesn't matter! You're evil, and if you're a part of me, you need to be excised like a filthy, rotten, pus-filled tumor!"

With that, he lunged for the keyboard—two keystrokes—and Alpha couldn't beat him there, but he could hit Anderson square in the jaw before Anderson pressed the first button.

Anderson's head snapped back, and Alpha lunged for him. In the past,

Anderson had simply stood there, limp, and taken the beating, taken what he thought he'd deserved—but he couldn't this time. Alpha had tried to link his deletion to everyone else's. He was truly homicidal, and Anderson couldn't let his friends, his true friends, the people who had kept him sane and loved him during the long, interminable trip, die because of one lousy, fucked-up program who didn't know the difference between reality and delusion.

This time, he didn't stand there. This time, he dodged, eluding Alpha's hard grip on his shoulder, and whirled away, coming up with a kick to Alpha's midriff that threw him back, clawing at the console for balance. For a moment, Anderson panicked—oh shit—what if he hit the wrong keys? What if he set the others up for annihilation again? Katy! Bobby! Oh Jesus!

Anderson angled his body so Alpha would be shoved sideways and tackled him, throwing him clear of the console to the end of the shuttle, toward the open ramp.

He flickered out of existence for a moment, and Anderson used the time to hurl himself at the console and review the settings to make sure the others were all right. He made it through one of three screens when Alpha appeared behind him and elbowed him between the shoulder blades. Anderson arched back in pain, and Alpha knotted his hard fist in Anderson's hair and shoved his head down, bouncing it off of the console while Anderson struggled to find a move that would break him away. Alpha had gotten in three hits now, and there was blood running into Anderson's eyes, and his right arm was numb from the blow to the back. Alpha's body had been honed—exercise, the strengthening of electrical pathways, developing muscles according to standard human male ratios, all of it, forging him into a nightmare of granite, muscle, and bone.

“You can't do it,” Alpha panted as Anderson managed to wriggle away and roll into a crouch. “You can't kill me and keep them alive. You're going to have to make a choice!”

Alpha made it to the keyboard, and Anderson couldn't tell, couldn't see what he did as Alpha pushed a button, and then two. Fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck. Anderson lunged for him again only to find that this time, Alpha was ready for him.

He dodged to the side just enough to capture Anderson's shoulders and force him face down into the console, then wrapped his elbow around Anderson's throat.

“Remember this, Anderson?” Alpha growled. “Like old times. I think you started to come when I did this, you twisted little fuck... maybe you'll even jizz

when you die!”

Anderson heaved himself up, turned his face toward the keyboard he needed, and tried to catch his breath. It wasn't working. His vision danced in angry darkness, and he could barely see his fingers as they reached for the board. *Two keystrokes*, he thought dizzily. Two keystrokes and this would be over, and he'd wear C.J. on his skin, and he would be whole, and this would be gone, and two keystrokes. Two keystrokes.

Alpha saw him struggling and laughed. “See, the best thing here is, when you fuck that up and kill us all? You'll have only yourself to blame!” Alpha's laughter kept going, ringing like oft-broken keys and maimed cathedral bells, and Anderson's head became a black cave of echoes. He was losing consciousness. He was dying.

For a moment, he almost let it happen. God. It would be so easy. No painful questions. No answers that might linger like the taste of poison. Just sleep. Just sleep, unbroken by screams.

He struggled for another breath, maybe his last, and smelled it. He'd bragged to Alpha about the smell of come because it was crude, and base, and it made the things that he and Alpha had done in their marriage bed profane, as they should be, but that wasn't how he felt about the musk that filled him with that last jagged breath.

It was comfort—a warm body in the night, a smile when his stomach felt like lead, dinner and fruit juice in an apartment scented by Chips's sharp floral feathers.

All that, and the carnal reality of flesh that laid itself open for Anderson to feast upon—and whispered soft words at the climax of the meal.

That was the smell of C.J.'s come on Anderson's skin. *That* was worth another breath.

Anderson heaved himself up one more time, loosened Alpha's grip for just a moment, and focused his eyes the best he could, reaching with his fingers. It came down to two keystrokes to live. Two keystrokes. There were no other people on the ship. Just him and the memory of C.J. on his skin.

Two keystrokes.

One. Two.

The pressure on his windpipe disappeared just as his vision went black.

THE readout on the corner of the vid screen said that he'd been in the shuttle for less than twenty minutes. It seemed unreal at its most hideously hilarious that his entire adult life should boil down to less than twenty minutes, but there it was.

He picked himself up and looked around the shuttle hopefully.

"Bobby? Kate?" he rasped. His throat was still recovering, and he coughed. "Henry? Risa?"

There was no answer.

None.

Gradually, the awareness seeped into him that, for the first time in eight and a half years, he was truly alone.

He refused to believe it at first—stumbled to the fresher, used the mirror and some actual towels placed there by the staff to clean the blood off his face. The shirt was unsalvageable, so he turned it inside out before toweling himself off and putting it back on. The sounds of him running the water, running the fresher, the small sonic wand from the newly added first aid kit over the cut on his head—all of those things rattled in the shuttle like a pebble in a rocket-fuel drum—and even the echoes sounded ashamed.

He didn't want to think about it. He'd chosen himself. He had friends, and at the last, he'd chosen himself. Alpha was right about him. All of it. He was a coward, a murdering coward, and every bruise, every break, every hit, and every rape had been something he'd earned.

Oh God, what would C.J. think? C.J. loved them—he'd told Anderson that frequently. They were good friends, good people. They were Anderson's family. Anderson had just killed his family.

C.J. would know that. Why would C.J. want to touch him ever again?

Anderson slid inside the apartment and went to the bathroom again, this time using some of the shower credits for himself. He used the soap he'd given C.J. and tried not to cry as he ran the washcloth over his bruised body. He hadn't said, "I love you." C.J. had said it, and Anderson had felt... soiled. Too dirty. He would have profaned the words.

He needed to say them.

He needed to say them before C.J. knew what Anderson had done and took the words back.

Because C.J. couldn't possibly love a coward and a murderer, a thief of love and sex, and a man who would sacrifice his family for his own survival,

could he?

For a moment, Anderson saw their faces in front of his eyes—Kate, strong-boned, dark-haired, blue-eyed. Bobby, brown hair, sparkling eyes, irrepressible grin. Henry, all sarcasm and analytical humor behind his spectacles, and gentle, funny, kind little Risa.

For a moment, he almost didn't make it to the bed. God. What he'd lost. Oh Jesus... what he'd fucking lost....

He swallowed and forced himself to move. He threw his dirty clothes into the hamper and pulled on some more bottoms and a T-shirt, and then slid into bed.

C.J. wrapped a strong arm around Anderson's middle, reminding Anderson of the fact that he was bruised all over, but Anderson slid into his embrace anyway. In the morning, C.J. would hate him. In the morning, he would have to face up to what he had done.

"I love you," Anderson murmured, his voice thick with grief.

"I love you too," C.J. said back.

Anderson wanted to talk more—he did—and say all the things C.J. deserved to hear, while C.J. would still want to hear them. But Anderson was exhausted, and his brain was shutting down. In the morning, this moment would all be over. In the morning, C.J. would be gone.

His brain switched off then. His own screams woke him up, but he didn't know where they came from.

Part 4: C.J.

Chapter 16

A Pebble in a Tin Can

“LITTLE brother?” Cassie must have let herself into C.J.’s house without knocking. C.J. hadn’t known she was back planetside, and that was the only reason he looked up. Most of his concentration was focused on the mock-up of Anderson’s hologram console that he’d installed in his planetside home about four weeks after the planet-to-station shuttle had landed.

C.J., Anderson, and Cassidy had been inside. Anderson had been so sedated they’d had to monitor his breathing. It was the only way to keep him from exhausting himself with screams.

On the trip over, Julio had sent them a postmortem from the shuttle’s bridge—and only as they analyzed the data, and saw the lengths Alpha had gone to eliminate *all* of the holograms from the shuttle’s programs, had they realized how grimly apt that particular expression had been.

Kate, Bobby, Henry, Risa—the memories, the programs, the complete list of qualities and experiences that made them *people*—had all been wiped clean in two keystrokes: Anderson’s ultimate price for setting himself free of Alpha.

They had watched the video feed in Jensen’s office, and then C.J. had thrown up in a trashcan, and they had watched it again. Neither Jensen nor Cassidy said a damned thing in censure, bless them both; they had simply slung their arms around his shoulders and helped get him water and then fetched him tissues as he’d come completely fucking unglued.

For two days, he and Anderson had been sedated, side by side, in adjoining beds in Jensen’s most gorgeous, peaceful room, where there were background sounds of bubbling brooks and crooning gamma birds, a subtle, enriched rainbow of colors on an ivory background, and fresh air coming in from fragrant

gardens that Jensen himself supervised because he'd always maintained that a healthy heart started with a healthy home.

In two days, C.J. had been ready to go outside and get some real air and sunshine. Anderson was still screaming to the point of sedation every time they allowed him to wake up. C.J. and Cassidy had spent two weeks being pampered and attended to and counseled and soothed by Jensen and Molly and their well-trained staff. And *yes*, Cassidy had flowers in her room every damned day. But after two weeks, Cassidy had gone back to the station to tie up loose ends. C.J. had stayed planetside to be with Anderson, and Anderson... Anderson continued to scare the hell out of them all.

It had taken Anderson a week to snap out of that first phase of violent reaction, and even then, Jensen had been forced to let him scream for *hours* until he'd exhausted himself enough to fall asleep on his own. He'd awakened dizzy, disoriented, and still convinced he was on the ship. The way he'd called for Kate and Bobby had about broken everybody's hearts.

The only person who elicited even the smallest response from him was C.J. For C.J., Anderson would smile. For C.J., he'd make an effort to put his surroundings in context. For C.J., Anderson would humor them all and pretend that the ship had docked and he wasn't floating around in a portable world, involved in a program his dreams had forged without his permission.

C.J. would walk into his room, or through the grounds, and Anderson would turn his head, track C.J. with his eyes, and actually talk. His words were halting and his voice rusty, because, as Jensen or Molly or any of the other staff members would tell them, Anderson only ever spoke in complete sentences to C.J.

"You're real," he would say serenely. He was always serene—after the screaming, it was his only emotion. "I know you, at least, are real."

"Excellent," C.J. complained bitterly to Jensen after a short visit in which that was the *only* thing Anderson had said. "I'm real. The problem is, he doesn't think *he* is."

Jensen had sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I told you, this is going to take some time."

"He's not responding," C.J. said disconsolately. "He's... he's... there hasn't been any change in weeks."

"Not responding" was putting it mildly. He may have reacted to C.J.—he looked up, he smiled vacantly, and he spoke in small sentences—but that was it.

There was an *absence* to everything he did that could not be blamed on sedation. His movements were slow and interrupted, too slow to be jerky, too uncoordinated to be natural, and getting his eyes to focus on a human face was damned near impossible unless that human was C.J. It was like his entire *being* was focused elsewhere. Anderson had checked out, and the pretty shell he left was set on housekeeping protocols. *I'm sorry, the real Anderson isn't here right now. I was told to make you comfortable during your conversation with the human book cover in his place.*

Jensen nodded unhappily, and they both looked to where Molly was taking Anderson's vitals a little way off. "Not responding" loomed large in the silence, and C.J. was surprised and comforted when Jensen reached from behind C.J. for a kind, platonic hug. Molly looked up from taking Anderson's vitals in the spring sunshine of the northern continent and smiled gently. She said something quietly to Anderson, who didn't even nod in acknowledgement, and then walked over to C.J. and hugged him from the other side. C.J. would remember that, his front pressed against Molly, Jensen at his back, simply giving him solid human contact as he'd put down some of his pain on their shoulders, and think that he couldn't have asked for better friends.

But neither of them made up for Anderson.

In a visit shortly after that hug, Anderson had looked up as C.J. approached and not smiled. "Have you spoken to them?" he asked, sounding like a twelve-year-old. "Have you? They aren't mad at me, are they? I set it up so they wouldn't be deleted. They know that, don't they?"

C.J. nodded. "Of course they kne—know that, Anderson. They know how important they w—are."

Behind Anderson, Jensen stood up and glared. C.J. glared back.

Anderson smiled a little and relaxed. "Good. When we're done visiting planetside, can we go back to the station, C.J.? I like it here, I do, but I miss Chips."

C.J. had smiled, maybe for the first time in weeks. "He misses you. Marshall says he's biting anyone else who tries to feed him. That's the first time that's ever happened."

Oh hells—that sunbeam smile. One day, Anderson was going to aim it at C.J., and C.J.'s heart would simply cease beating, impaled by that glossy, wide-eyed, everything's-gonna-be-fine grin.

"I'm ready to go back whenever you are," Anderson said guilelessly, and

Jensen's pained grimace didn't tell C.J. anything he didn't know already. C.J.'s leave and his regular month off were going to be long gone before Anderson could even face the final thing he'd done to survive—and forgive himself for it like everyone else had, including the people he'd left behind.

But C.J. couldn't leave him behind.

"Well, Anderson, let's wait until my man here gives you the thumbs-up, okay?"

To his credit, Jensen didn't even try to make a dirty joke of it. He just shook his head silently, concern burning in his eyes.

They spent a half an hour talking about the various flocks of gamma birds—Chips may have been lavender, but the others came in every shade of refracted light—that roamed the grounds. There were also cats whose ancestors had been brought over in cryogenic suspension in the first colony ships. Jensen actually hired people to clean up after them and feed them and keep them healthy so the residents could have the therapy of holding a creature that asked nothing more from life than to be scratched on the ass on demand. It was said that humans used to be allergic to the animals—Jensen had done a dissertation on how, if that were true, then learning to conquer a physical illness in order to enable a closer relationship with any creature whatsoever was proof that man had the seeds of healing in his own soul.

Anderson had been adopted by one of the facility animals, a giant ginger ex-Tom who kneaded his lap unmercifully as he sat—moderately sedated—in a lounge chair in the shade.

"I've been trying to figure out a name for him," Anderson said, chucking the animal under the chin. "It's hard. It seems that all the names I've ever liked are the names of someone I've killed."

C.J. caught his breath then and wondered at the rush of adrenaline in his own veins. A tiny admission—a huge sliver of hope. "How about Conrad Jackson," C.J. said grandly, and Anderson looked at him, more animation in his face now than C.J. had seen in nearly three weeks.

"Really?"

"Yeah!" C.J. grinned. "See, my dad's name is Christopher James, my mom's is Catherine Jennifer. So when we were born, they gave Cass and I the same initials."

Anderson started laughing. "Cee, Jay!" he giggled, and C.J. nodded.

“Yup. I like this guy. Maybe we can keep him when you’re all done here. We’ll name him Conrad Jackson—he can be a C.J. too—he’ll fit right in.”

Anderson finished the visit with some color in his cheeks, and some hope, and C.J. walked away with a plan.

“I’m going to resurrect them,” he told Jensen, and the look on Jensen’s square-jawed, tanned face was nothing short of appalled.

“Resurrect *who*?”

“His family,” C.J. said with determination. “His holographic people. I’m going to fix them. There’s got to be a backup or a failsafe or something. We’ve got to be able to pull them back. They’re not dead. He’s got no guilt—”

“He’s still fucked up!” Jensen sputtered, as though he’d been trying to spit out something more profound, but that was as far as he got.

“*I know that!*” C.J. snarled, so out of character that he clapped his hand to his mouth. “But... just listen to me! He thinks he’s a murderer! Alpha, that bastard—”

“Who was part of his personality—”

“So he’s a bastard too!” C.J. snapped, willing the tears back. He’d cried a lot, that first week, and was determined not to give Jensen any more reasons to pump him full of sedation and then prod at his wounded feelings like a dentist prodded at gum rot. “You’re not hearing me! He’s not cutting himself a break! He’s not giving himself any slack! That’s why he’s lost in a fucking quasar implosion! He’d be bad enough if he thought he killed Alpha. You’d have to spend a year putting him back together then, right? But he thinks he killed them *all*... the good parts of himself too! All that’s left is... is his smile as a little kid and....” Oh fuck. No more. No more crying, no more helplessness, no more shoving off his over-amplified emotions on Jensen or Molly or his sister. He’d helped make this mess. He’d let Anderson seduce him when he should have been strong, and Anderson had walked into that room, his home, the inside of his brain put on holographic display for the world to see, and had a throwdown death match with the worst parts of himself with repercussions *no one* could have predicted. C.J. would not cry. He had to say this, but he would. Not. Cry.

“And...,” he tried again.

“His memories that you are good for him,” Jensen said softly, and C.J. closed his eyes tightly and nodded.

“You’re not going to be good for him if you get lost in obsession too,”

Jensen pointed out. “And honestly, C.J., I think you may need to leave for a little while if he’s going to get better.”

C.J. whirled, holding his stomach in what felt to be a world-class wound of betrayal. “He needs me!”

“And he needs to know he’s real!”

“I can help him do that!”

“Not when you’re falling apart!” Jensen finished bitterly, and then he looked away. “Look, C.J., you wanted to make your point? Consider it made. You’re a stand-up guy. A forever lover, when it’s the right person. I get it. You were right all along. We weren’t it. We’re good friends, we were great in bed, but you’re right. You were right all along. I wasn’t going to work for you. I wasn’t who you needed....”

“It was the other way around,” C.J. muttered, “and we’re getting off the point.”

“That’s not true!” Jensen half-laughed. “I needed you plenty back then!”

C.J. shook his head. “No. No. You loved me,” he said sadly, and then thought he should be completely honest. “And I loved you to the point of space madness, but you didn’t need me.”

Jensen sighed, scrubbed his face with his hand, and then said, “Fuck it,” and took two steps toward C.J. and put his hands on C.J.’s shoulders. C.J. had always known Jensen was tall and built like a god, but he’d never truly appreciated his friend’s ability to protect people until C.J. himself was suddenly warmed by that massive chest when he needed it most.

“Listen to me,” Jensen said softly. “You’re right—I didn’t need you. Anderson does. You’re right about that, and I was wrong. You can be there when it counts, C.J., you’ve already proven that. You’ve gone through an awful lot for that kid, and don’t think it doesn’t matter. But you can’t do what he did. You can’t put so much of yourself into him that there’s nothing left of you. That won’t help him, and it will kill you, and we may not be meant for each other, but I love you, and Molly loves you, and your goddamned harpy of a sister loves you, and your parents think you walk on water. Please. For the love of all of us, walk away from this one for a little while. Go back to the station and work, and give Anderson some time. We can set up a daily video conference time, you can write him, and you can come back in three months and see if he thinks he’s real yet, okay?”

C.J. closed his eyes for a minute. God. Oh God. He was so tired. He

couldn't sleep anymore without Anderson's breathing in his bed. He found himself waking up every night at screaming time, wondering if Anderson was waking up and needing him. He'd asked Jensen. The answer was no, because they apparently sedated the holy mother of shit out of the kid just to break his body of that rhythm. But now C.J. couldn't sleep at night in his lovely little bungalow in the sparsely populated seaside vacation neighborhood.

Jensen had chosen this area specifically to start his facility. For one thing, it sold directly to the workers at the space station, and like C.J., Jensen's specialty had been related to the particular psychological problems that developed in space. For another, he'd gotten funding from the Space Trading Federation, so much of his money came from the people who ran the station on the condition that he'd be available to treat the Federation's people. It truly was lovely—tall, fragrant trees closed in and canopied any unoccupied land, and beyond them, and the gentle hills that sloped down to the shore, was the incessant soothing mutter of the ocean. C.J. had taken the photograph, the one he had at the station, not many clicks from his planetside home, and he loved it down here.

But now? Now, every shushing moment of peace seemed to echo, amplified by the roaring void where Anderson should be. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fucking fair. They'd been happy in each other's arms, hadn't they? It hadn't been sweet—Anderson was too driven and C.J. too desperate for sweet—but there'd been a chance, hadn't there? Sweetness would come? Tenderness would come? That was the way of things when you loved someone, right? It had been that way with his first girlfriend before university, and it had been that way with Jensen. First there was the thundering lightning strike of lust, and then there was a sweet, cleansing rain of kindness, right?

There would be kindness, C.J. swore. There would be tenderness, sweetness, soft touches, quiet moments—there had to be hope for that to come, or there was no hope at all.

"I can't go," C.J. mumbled against Jensen's chest. "Let me see if I can bring them back. If I can bring the holos back, and he has someone, he's not alone, *then* I can go."

Jensen had sworn under his breath but had let the matter drop. C.J. had gone home, and every hour not spent with Anderson since then—and there were a lot, because Anderson was in constant therapy and near constant sedation—had been spent looking at the reconstruction of the holo-keyboard on his coffee table and trying to put together the puzzle of keystrokes that had led to the

annihilation of Anderson's second family.

Every time he thought he had it, thought he could reconstruct the sequence of keystrokes before the final, fatal two, his vision was impeded by the fight between Anderson and Alpha, the deadly, bloody mess of violence and suppressed sex that stripped Anderson of his illusions and his humanity and his dignity, right down to the pitiful end, when he woke up and called uselessly for his friends.

And that was where C.J. was now. Sitting on the couch between the four white walls and arched doorways of his bungalow, staring desperately at the monitor. He was trying to see everything at once—the keyboard between Alpha's body and Anderson's hand, the data that was scrambled by the multiple hits of their bodies against the console, and the logical sequence of the entire thing to see what it would have been if killing every hologram on the ship had been their intention in the first place. He was failing dismally. But still, he had no intention of quitting until Cassie barged her way into his home with nothing more than a "Little brother, are you home?"

C.J., who hadn't realized she'd come back planetside, was startled into looking up. "Yeah, Cassidy. Where the hell else would I be?"

There was something in Cassie's face then, something rough and painful. "C.J.," she said softly, "you look like hell. In fact, I think hell would kick you out for your smell alone. How long have you been here?"

C.J. blinked, feeling dizzy now that he was looking away from his project, which was scattered across the kitchen table, for the first time in.... "Oh Christ, is it morning?"

"It's afternoon, you dumbass. I couldn't get a hold of you because...." She grimaced and looked at the offline monitors on the kitchen table. "Because apparently you have made sure no one could, and when I called Jensen to see where you were, he was almost frantic because you missed your visit with—"

C.J. launched himself wildly off of the couch and then fell on his ass. "Oh holy shit, Anderson! He's probably frantic!"

"He's fine! What the hell's wrong with you?"

C.J. blinked. "I can't feel my legs."

Cassidy cried like a man, C.J. thought analytically. She didn't wring her hands and search for a tissue and dissolve into a pretty little pout or a moue of unhappiness. She scowled like she was mad at the emotion and used the top of her shirt to wipe her eyes and just kept on talking like the whole thing wasn't

happening.

“Little brother, Anderson is fine, or, you know, as fine as you can be when your entire conscious and subconscious minds have checked out on a little break from reality to heal, okay? You show up tomorrow, or, you know, hell, *call* him tomorrow with video on the monitor, and he’ll know you haven’t forgotten him, okay? You hear me?”

C.J. nodded and did his own scowling. “I hear you. I just... I promised him I’d be there....”

“C.J., can you feel your legs now?”

C.J. grimaced. Yes, the painful tingling flooding them felt like his skin was full of hot ants. “Yeah.”

“Then get off your ass and take a goddamned shower. I’m going to cook you something and....” She looked around the kitchen with her nose wrinkled. “Maybe order some groceries or something. Or stock your refrigerator. Or, uhm, rent a flamethrower. But first, you get off your ass and get in the fucking shower, okay?”

C.J. wobbled up to a standing position and tried to focus on her. He’d missed his appointment with Anderson? But he’d come home the day before and sat at the table and....

“I was just about to figure it out...,” he mumbled, feeling like a little kid.

“*Cyril John Poulson, get your fucking ass in the goddamned shower now!*”

And he forgot what he was about to figure out. Leaning against the walls, he limped off to the shower, not able to think of much of anything at all.

He was a little better after the shower, but his body still ached all over from sitting cramped over the coffee table, focused on his obsession. Hell—his bladder still ached from holding it for what felt like a thousand years. And now, listening to Cassie rant as she pawed through his kitchen fixing up the groceries she’d had delivered into something that passed for food, he found the ache in his head surpassed everything else.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled through a mouthful of eggs and toast. Heaven. Fresh eggs, fresh bread, spread that wasn’t rancid—it was heaven! “I didn’t mean to worry you. Just got caught up—”

“Bullshit, Cyril,” Cassidy snapped, sitting down hard with a hot cup of Hermes-Eight coffee. Another thing that came along with the first colonists, but the particularly rich soil of Hermes-Eight gamma made it much more potent.

“It’s not bullshit! I was....”

Cassie shook her head. “No, that part I believe. What you’re doing to yourself here, *that’s* what’s bullshit.”

“If I can just... just get it to work, Cass....” C.J.’s voice was wobbling again, and he squinted at the clock, wondering how long he’d gone without sleep.

Cassie breathed out hard through her nose. “C.J., you ever think about the word ‘bullshit’?”

C.J. blinked. “Not particularly.”

“Do we *have* bulls on any of the Hermes-Eight planets?”

“Uhm, no.” They had a mammal with the potential to give milk and be used for meat, but it had a two-chamber stomach unlike the old Terran cows. It was also a burgundy-colored pinniped, with flippers instead of hooves, because it spent its time in many of the vast seas of Hermes-Eight-Prime.

“No. We don’t have bovine quadrupeds with a stud ‘bull’ to actually defecate on the surface of any planet in the Hermes-Eight system, do we? Do you know why we say ‘bullshit’?”

C.J. was staring at her like he used to stare at animated vids as a child. “Not a clue.”

“Because an entire collective arrived here in cryogenic suspension after carrying the *memory* of bulls and their shit to this system from over forty light-years away. They arrived here and built a life here and even improved upon space travel and technology so that our system, unlike some others we’ve heard of, is totally up on the ecological dos and don’ts that almost destroyed our home planet, but they were still a *collective*, and they still retained things. Things like... I don’t know, movies that you watch and books that you read, a lot of them originated on old Terra because our ancestors left us with a memory of those things, just like they left us with the memory of bulls and shit. Do you know what Anderson’s mining colony remembered?”

C.J.’s head snapped back at the answer. Anderson had preserved those memories, he thought painfully. They must have remembered books, because they wrote books. They remembered videos because they had a library from across all of the human populated quadrants. They remembered music because they had imported music and they made their own. C.J. had a memory, thin as a thread, of a plaintive, yearning woman’s voice, fragile and pure, rendering an unspeakably ugly moment meaningful.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Yes, I know what they remembered.”

Cass did that thing, where she wiped her eyes on the inside of her shirt and left a big smudge of what she called her “planetside face” on it, because she never wore makeup when she was working. “So do I,” she whispered. “And so does Marshall and Julio, and all of the techs who worked on Anderson’s ship. And baby brother?”

C.J. actually looked at her this time. His eyes were burning and his vision was blurred, but he saw her. “Yeah?”

“So does Anderson. Those people he thinks he killed, he’ll remember who they were. He will. But he spent ten years on that ship being the collective memory of his entire mining colony. He’s going to have to remember all of that first. You don’t need to be here for that. That’s something that’s going to have to happen on his own.”

C.J. nodded, his throat so swollen he didn’t know how he could even breathe. “I can’t leave him when he thinks I’m all that’s real,” he whispered.

Cass nodded and wiped her eyes again. “Well, sweetheart, you’d better hope he comes to his senses soon, because we need you on the station. We can find someone else, but he’ll have to be permanent, because we can’t afford another fuck-up like that X-guy. We can find someone else, but he won’t do as good a job, and he won’t love it like you really truly love it up there, and you’ll have to work under him too when you come back.” She swallowed. “I really think you should come up and take the job, Cyril John. You... I mean, I didn’t see it, when Marshall first told me he wanted you there. I honestly... I saw my little brother, fucking up like always. But these last months, I guess I had to look at you through Anderson’s eyes to see what a good guy you really are, and I’m sorry for it. But don’t let all that good you’ve got going for you drown in Anderson’s pain, baby. I just....”

She actually sniffled, and C.J. stood up and wrapped his arms around her shoulders from behind her as she sat staring down into her empty ceramic coffee mug.

“I’m sorry, Cass. I’m sorry. I... I’m not as good a person as you think. I mean... you *know* what set him off... you *know* how badly I—”

“Shut up,” she cried. “C.J., you didn’t do anything wrong. Yeah, I saw what set him off. What set him off was that you finally gave in. What were you going to do, little brother? Break his heart? Don’t you think that would have set him off too? Don’t you think that would have made him worse? At least now, he

knows that *something* is real.” She pulled his arms even tighter around her and rubbed her wet cheek on his hand.

“You’ve been a better you in these past months than I ever suspected, Cyril. Don’t shit on it now. Anderson was... God, baby, he was heading for this from the moment his sister pressed ‘go’ on the remote. We’ve just got to give him time, okay?”

C.J. nodded, but he couldn’t... hell, even with his sister, who could handle any bull, pinniped, mammal, or Artellian octoped by the horns and wrestle it to the ground without bothering to spit in its eye, even with Cassie crying in his arms, he couldn’t commit to leaving Anderson. “I’ll ask him,” C.J. promised vaguely. “I’ll ask him, okay?” He didn’t think about how unlikely it would be that Anderson could let him go. He didn’t think about how on Earth Anderson could even address the idea of letting his one real thing walk away. He just promised to his sister, because he loved her, and because he couldn’t think, couldn’t reason, couldn’t plan, couldn’t *anything* as long as Anderson was stuck in the limbo of madness, the murky white hall of denial of exactly who he was and what he had done.

“Okay, C.J., you ask him. But ask him tomorrow, all right?”

“Kay,” C.J. said, his vision filling with sort of a white haze around the outside of it. “What are we doing now?”

“Come on, let’s watch one of those horrid comedy things I hated in school.” Cass stood up and grabbed his hand and hauled him back to his small entertainment room. She had apparently moved all of his holo-gear off of it, because the coffee table was clean, and without that reminder of failure, it wasn’t a bad place. It was larger than the one in his quarters stationside, and the walls and furniture were a light, airy, eggshell color, but the cushions and blankets and drapes were all of those solid, bright blues and greens, reds and oranges and golds, that C.J. loved so much in his picture, or at the seashore. C.J. loved color, he thought dreamily. Poor Anderson, existing in that foggy, white-washed world.

“Why would you want to do that?” C.J. asked, truly lost.

“Because you know the words to the dialogue and the words to the opening songs and even the beats between the lines. You’ll be asleep before you can even think that asleep was a thing to be.”

She must have been right. He didn’t even remember sitting with her on the couch, but he woke up late the next morning under a blanket from the back of the couch. His sister was in the kitchen again, fixing him breakfast, singing a

song their mother had taught her, something about sailing away. He thought it had come with the original colonists on the ships, and the thought made the decision she needed him to make even harder than ever to face.

Part 5: Anderson

Chapter 17

Human Songs

ANDERSON remembered C.J.'s sister. She'd scared him at first—her tongue had been so sharp, and he could tell C.J. wanted to just smack her sometimes, just like Anderson had wanted to do with Melody.

Anderson had a picture of his family by his bedside. It had been one of the few things C.J. had remembered to grab when they had been transported down to the planet. At least that was what Anderson had been told—he didn't remember that part at all.

He looked at that picture every morning and tried to figure out how he fit into that family at all. He *knew* he was the one boy, but he didn't know anything else. He had that association of C.J.'s big sister and C.J. wanting to smack her with how he'd felt about his own big sister, but other than that, it was like an old video, faded, even in his memory.

C.J. had told him about the letters inside the tablet with the picture, but Anderson hadn't read those yet. He thought that maybe he should remember something about the family first—otherwise it felt like intruding, or worse, *cheating*.

Cheating is bad, he thought somberly. Cheating in little things, like memory games or computers, that was bad.

He couldn't remember why.

But he remembered Cassidy, with her lovely midnight skin and her high cheekbones, her exotic, almond-shaped eyes and full lips. She reminded him of Kate, not in appearance, but in that no-nonsense set of lines between her eyebrows. Cassidy and Kate had gotten along—he knew that for a fact.

“Yes,” he said serenely, when Dr. Cherry let Cassidy into his room. “Of course I remember you. You’re C.J.’s sister. I had dinner in your quarters.” He smiled a little, remembering fruit juice and laughing a lot. “We had a good time. I’m glad I didn’t kill you when I killed my family. That would have hurt.”

Cassidy grimaced. A lot of people made that face when talking to Anderson these days. He sort of wished they’d stop.

“I’m damned glad you didn’t kill me either,” she said tartly. “But then, it would have taken more than two buttons on a computer program to do that.”

The words made something buzz electrically on the back of his neck, but he couldn’t put any words to the feeling or to the sudden clarity of the world around him. It was like a fog in his vision had grown less dense, but since he didn’t want to explain the fog in his vision to the doctors anyway, he sure wasn’t going to mention when it got better, was he?

“I hope so,” Anderson answered neutrally.

You hope so? Seriously, you even programmed Bobby with better manners than that!

Cassie smiled wearily and patted his knee, and Kate subsided so he didn’t have to answer her.

“I know so,” Cassie said. “Honey, how are you doing here?”

“It’s tranquil.” And boring! Is there any possible way we could get out and go have some fun?

“C.J.’s sorry he forgot about yesterday. He’ll be here today. Is that okay?”

It is possible that C.J. is not in the best emotional health, Anderson. Perhaps you should tell him that his presence is not needed every day. “It’s fine.”

Cassidy sighed and peered at Anderson through the fog like she was trying to figure out what was going on inside his head. A whole lot, actually. Kate and Bobby were having a whispered conversation, Henry was taking notes on his tablet about what Cassie was saying, and Risa was simply all big eyes, taking in their conversation. She did so love a diversion.

“Anderson, baby, I need you to do me a favor, okay?”

“Sure, Cass, whatever you want.” There was a voice trying to whisper that he didn’t give a shit about anyone, but he ignored that one. He’d killed that voice. He didn’t have to listen to it anymore.

Cassie sighed. Anderson was getting used to that sound too. “I need you to

let C.J. go.”

Everybody was silent. “Go where?”

“Go back to the station.”

Anderson, you need him!

Don't worry about it, Anderson—we'll be all right.

It's not right that he should spend his time here when you're otherwise talking to us, is it, Anderson?

But Jesus, Anderson, are you ever planning to get laid again?

“Why does he want to leave me?”

“He doesn't,” Cassidy said, her voice rough. “He doesn't want to leave you at all, not to sleep, not to eat. Even when he's gone, he's thinking about you. He missed yesterday because he was trying to reconstruct the hologram program for your friends....”

Well, that's not a lot of fun for C.J., is it?

Yes! Make him do that! Anderson, we could watch vids again!

That's not a very constructive use of his time.

Poor C.J., he must be so worried.

“I don't think he can do that,” Anderson said quietly. “It was too jumbled. Alpha really fucked with the controls before I got there. Anything else that happened probably....” He swallowed. They were dead.

Wasn't your fault, buddy.

Well, technically, he was the one who pressed the delete button.

That's not what he meant, asshole!

(Hurt silence.)

Cassie was looking at him with shiny eyes and a full, quivering lower lip. “That's not the problem, Anderson. The problem is that he's killing himself looking for a way to fix it. For a way to fix *you*.”

Bullshit, Anderson, you're not broken!

Dude, nothing can fix you! That's why we're awesome!

Anderson, I don't think that's healthy for C.J.

Oh, poor C.J.—he must feel terrible!

“I don’t want C.J. to be hurt for me,” Anderson said quietly, feeling a little dizzy. Alpha, he thought. Alpha would have barked over all their voices by now and probably demanded Anderson’s attention on Alpha himself. Anderson could have tuned out this painful conversation, on the inside, on the outside, and let Alpha tell him how this was all his fault, and how loving anybody was only going to hurt the people he cared about, and how Alpha was the only one who knew what was good for Anderson.

But Alpha was dead. Anderson had killed him so Anderson could be with C.J.

“I don’t want C.J. to leave me, though.”

Cassidy took a deep, shaking breath. “Anderson, will C.J. be any less real if he leaves you here to heal?”

“I don’t want to be alone.”

You’re not alone.

Shut up, Bobby. It’s not like we’re real.

Are you alone if your delusions talk to you?

(Hurt silence.)

There was a warm, comforting, and masculine hand on his shoulder, and suddenly Dr. Cherry was there. “Anderson, you won’t be alone. I’ll be here. Dr. Silverberg will be here. We’re C.J.’s friends, and we’ll take care of you.”

Dr. Silverberg was suddenly crouching at his feet, her pretty red hair pulled up behind her and a sweet smile on her face. Anderson liked Dr. Silverberg; she was often quiet, like Risa, except she was confident when she *did* choose to talk, like Henry.

“C.J. needs to heal too, Anderson,” Dr. Silverberg was saying. “He loves you a whole lot, and you were suddenly....”

“Otherwise occupied,” Anderson said grandly, and Kate and the others smirked.

Even Dr. Silverberg smiled. “Exactly,” she said, as though she was fully aware of the people he murdered holding court behind his eyes.

Suddenly Dr. Cherry was crouched at Anderson’s feet too, and Dr. Silverberg’s hand was resting on his shoulder, maybe for balance, but Anderson thought it looked like comfort too. “Anderson, you’ve got to understand. I know you and I have only just met, but I’ve known C.J. forever, and he would stay

with you for longer than that, if it was possible. But he's hurting here. His heart is wasting away, watching you when he can't help."

That sucks, Anderson, but there's nothing you can do about it.

Anderson, you were brought up better than that. If you care about him, you need to let him heal.

Anderson, I'm not sure you're psychologically ready for a real relationship at this point. You've read enough literature to know that your psyche is going to need considerable healing.

Oh, poor C.J.

"I love him," Anderson said with as much dignity as possible.

Cassidy sniffled and wiped her face on the inside of her red sequined shirt. Anderson liked the way she dressed, and it distressed him to see her wreck something that made her look so pretty.

"Can we get her a tissue?" he asked Dr. Silverberg, and she grimaced at him, tears in her own eyes.

"Here, Cassie, I've got plenty," she said, and there was a hitch in her voice too.

"Why is everyone so upset?" he asked, feeling bad.

"Because we want what's best for you, Anderson," Dr. Cherry said, stealing one of Dr. Silverberg's tissues with the familiarity of a good friend or a lover. "And we want what's best for C.J., and you two are going to be really good for each other, but you've got to be patient. And you've got to let each other go. And that's going to be really hard for right now. And that hurts us all."

Anderson waved his hand by his ear before the others could start adding their opinions. *These are C.J.'s friends*, he thought distantly. He remembered C.J. talking to Dr. Cherry while they were up at the station. "C.J. has them too," he said in wonder.

"C.J. has what, sweetheart?" Cassie asked, and he knew the others were meeting eyes, but he couldn't do anything about that.

"He has a Kate and a Bobby and a Henry and a Risa... but he doesn't have an Alpha. He doesn't have an Alpha. That's the difference," Anderson figured, a little bit of wonder in his voice. "He doesn't have an Alpha. That's why C.J.'s happy."

"Naw, baby," Cassie said, and Anderson thought it was funny that she

knew what he was talking about when no one else did. “He’s not happy because he doesn’t have an Alpha. He’s happy because *you’re* his Alpha, and you’re a really good guy.”

Anderson swallowed, feeling the weight of a grief he’d never known he could hold. “But I killed my Alpha,” he said, feeling mournful and hating himself for it. “I killed my Alpha. How can he love me when I killed my Alpha?”

“You didn’t kill him,” Cassie insisted, putting Dr. Silverberg’s tissue to good use. “You deleted a hologram that had outlived its use. Alpha—that was you all along, baby. And there’s not a world, in space, in a holodeck, or in the imagination, where Cyril couldn’t love you, especially not for that.”

Anderson wasn’t crying, was he? He wanted to, but he wasn’t... he wasn’t, was he? Of course, he wasn’t screaming either. But as far as he could remember, he hadn’t cried in a long, long time. The last time he’d cried had been... had been....

I don’t remember.

Neither do I.

I wasn’t programmed yet.

Me neither.

Had been lost in a big, black void of unimaginable loss. “How crazy am I?” he asked pitifully, wiping his face on his sleeve. “Am I too crazy for C.J. to love?”

Cassidy shook her head. “You’re going to be fine, baby. You’ve just got to give C.J. some space so he can heal too. Can you do that? He won’t go unless you let him. He won’t even ask, Anderson. He won’t even tell you that it’s time to go back. But it is time to go back. He’s going to lose his job, and everything he’s worked for, and his whole life he thought he was a fuck-up, you know? He thought he was the least of us....”

“That’s not true!” Anderson insisted, knowing that in this, at least, he wasn’t crazy.

Cassie nodded her head. “You’re right, it’s not true. And with you, he’s become the man we all knew he could be. But he’s never going to know that, not here, not trying to do the impossible while you’re not well enough to know he’s here.”

She’s crying, Anderson. You need to do something about that.

Aw—see, Anderson. Even Bobby's upset! You've got to help her!

Anderson, she's really unhappy, and she only wants what's best for C.J.

Please, Anderson? Poor C.J.

"What do I have to do?" Anderson asked, lost in the conversation again.

"You have to let him go."

The cacophony in Anderson's head was so deafening after that statement that he didn't come to until after his sedation.

C.J. WAS there, at his bedside, and Anderson felt helpless tears leaking out of his eyes. If C.J. was here and he was in bed, he'd skewed off course somehow. He'd finally set a reliable course through the day so that he would be alert and ready for C.J.'s visits.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to sleep."

C.J. chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Not your fault, my man. Here, let's sit up, okay? You sit up. I've got some food here. I guess you skipped lunch when you... uhm... what did you call it again, Jensen?"

Dr. Cherry looked at Anderson and grimaced, as though begging Anderson to go along with him in something. "A catharsis, C.J., you know, like when you watch a really good movie and cry?"

C.J. brightened. "Well, that's got to be a good thing, right? I mean, I always feel good after that."

"It's only good if you're crying for the right reasons, buddy," Dr. Cherry muttered, and again, that grimace, begging Anderson to go along with him.

"I don't even know what the right reasons are," he said to the doctor, and that earned him a grateful smile, even though it was nothing less than God's honest truth.

"The right reasons will come along soon enough, Anderson," Dr. Cherry said quietly. "Anderson, do you remember what we talked about this afternoon?"

You know what he's talking about, Anderson.

Man, this is totally fucked up. I mean, I get the reasoning, but really?

Yes—stop making excuses for him, Bobby.

I just don't like seeing him get hurt, Henry.

Stop it! Please stop arguing. It hurts my head.

See? You guys are making Risa afraid again. Anderson knows what he's supposed to do. Leave him alone. He'll be fine.

"Yes, Dr. Cherry, you can leave if you like," he said, wanting this to be as private as he could manage at the moment.

There was a reassuring squeeze on Anderson's arm, and then the handsome auburn-haired doctor walked out quietly, and Anderson was left looking at C.J.

His light green eyes were bloodshot, and he was pale underneath the coffee and cream complexion of his skin. His cheekbones seemed... prominent, somehow, and so did the edge of his jaw and his collarbones.

"You've lost weight," Anderson murmured, surprised when there wasn't an entire chorus to chime in on the simple observation.

"So have you."

Anderson reached out and grabbed C.J.'s hand. "It's going to take me a long time to get better," he said, treading very carefully.

"I'll be here."

Anderson squeezed his hand, feeling the bones underneath the skin, fragile and bare without the muscle and fat to protect them. "You shouldn't have to be," he grveled, not sure how he spoke at all.

C.J. shrugged. "It's worth it, right? I mean, I know you don't remember right now, but it was *really* worth it!" C.J. wagged his eyebrows and cracked a joke, and Anderson was suddenly assaulted by the thinness of his voice. There was not much of C.J. left to crack the joke, to make the smile, to bear Anderson's weight, as scant as it had become.

"It will be," Anderson promised. "It will be. I'll get better."

It was worth it. Whether the statement was true or not, making the effort was worth it. C.J. seemed to grow more substantial with every word.

"I'm sayin'!" he crowed, and Anderson smiled, feeling finally that what he was doing was right. There was no chorus to back him up in this, no internal warble of friendly voices, and that alone was encouraging.

"But I need you to do me a favor first," Anderson said, and fought those helpless tears again. Well, fuck. He would have liked to do this with dignity.

Not possible for goofy kids like us. Bobby's voice was unmistakable—and unmistakably familiar. For a moment, Anderson felt like he was chasing a

sunbeam through a blackened window, and then he focused on C.J. and what he needed to do.

“What’s that, baby?” C.J. said, and he was so fervent, so sincere. Anderson realized that he’d claw his way to the space station in a fishbowl helmet with a piece of string if Anderson asked. For that kind of devotion, there was really only one reward Anderson could offer.

“I need you to leave me here for a little while—”

“No!”

“Hear me out!” Anderson sounded stern, even to himself, and he both hated the sound and was glad for it, because C.J. was paying attention to him like that voice mattered.

“I’m not going to leave.”

“You’re hurting yourself here,” Anderson said. “I can’t... I... I need you to go so I can be better for you. I’m worried for you. I... I’m not strong enough to worry.”

“Well don’t worry about me—”

“I can’t help it! And I want to worry about you. I want to do what’s right for someone else for a change. I want to make sure you take care of yourself. You can’t do that here. You need... you need to give me some room. Give me some dignity, C.J.!” Anderson inwardly glared at Bobby, but he felt this in his bones.

“Dignity?” C.J. sounded skeptical.

“Do you think this is how I want you to see me? Helpless and... and lost?”

“I can find you.”

“Don’t you see, baby?” The endearment came so easily—Anderson wondered if he’d ever used it before, and he didn’t think so. But C.J. was crying, and Anderson was stroking his hand and the inside of his wrist, and he wanted to say something... soft. Something that would make the rest of it less fucking hard. “Don’t you see? I don’t want you to have to find me. I want to find myself and then show you who I am.”

C.J. took a deep breath and then wiped his eyes on the inside of his shirt—something bright today, with gold-tinted rainbows across the front. “I’ve already seen who you are.”

“Yeah, but that was the scary stuff. I’ve got....” Anderson had to pause, to search his mind to see if it was true. He said it anyway. “I’ve got some amazing

parts I've saved just for you. You just have to let me figure out where they're hidden."

C.J. laughed, and it was maybe the most cynical sound Anderson had ever heard. "You sound like a romance story. How can you sound like a romance story when you're breaking my fucking heart?"

Anderson wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and wondered where Dr. Silverberg had gone with her inexhaustible supply of tissues.

"I have no idea. Just give me some space, just a little, and maybe I'll be able to tell you then." Anderson didn't want space. He just wanted to lean against C.J. and bawl like a lost child.

C.J. took a deep breath, sobbing on the exhale. "Oh crap, Anderson. Is that what you really fucking want?"

"Yes," Anderson lied. "Yes... oh hell... no, C.J., I don't want you to go. But you've got to, you see? Don't you see? I couldn't live if I killed one more goddamned lover...."

He broke then, and cried for real. Not the passive way, where the tears just fell, but the broken way, the way that ended up with his head on C.J.'s shoulder and the sobs shaking them both and nothing happening in his head at all because it was all happening in his body, in his eyes and throat and the sting of the salt against his skin, and in the blessed, heavenly way C.J.'s arms went around his shoulders and C.J.'s big hands cupped the back of his head and C.J. cried with him as they prepared to say goodbye.

Chapter 18

Of Silk Cocoons and Wings

C.J.'s parents came to meet Anderson the day they came to take C.J. to the shuttle that bore him away.

Anderson had prepared himself all day, and it still was not enough preparation to see C.J. as a beloved, worried-over son and brother as Catherine and Christopher Poulson came to Anderson's favorite spot in the shade to introduce themselves.

Like Anderson wouldn't have known who they were.

Catherine was a slightly older, much more serene version of her feisty daughter—dark skin, stunning cheekbones, full lips, and exotic, tilted oval eyes. Christopher was distinguished, with skin as pale as Anderson's and merry blue eyes that seemed to laugh cheekily at the world as he looked around the facility.

They were not laughing at Anderson, though.

"How are you doing, baby?" Catherine had a smoky voice, and she asked the question while she was coming to sit on the cushioned bench next to Anderson. C.J. made introductions sitting across from them, and then his mother asked the question again.

Anderson looked at those gentle brown eyes and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It seemed wrong to lie to her, but he did anyway. "I'm fine, thank you."

Catherine raised her eyes. "Honey, please don't bullshit me."

Unexpectedly, C.J. and Cassidy started to laugh, and their mother looked at them sharply. "What?"

C.J. shook his head. "Nothing, Mom, just leave Anderson alone. He's as fine as he's going to be for the moment."

Anderson looked at him sharply and saw that C.J.'s head was turned. With a wrench, both from the babble in his head and the lethargy that had beset him since his arrival, he reached out and grabbed C.J.'s chin, just to confirm that C.J. was not fine either.

"We will be better," he promised, and C.J.'s father surprised him by

wrapping a protective arm around C.J.'s shoulders and squeezing Anderson's shoulder with his other hand.

"You must be so proud," he said with a faint smile. "Look at all you've accomplished, Anderson. You'll be fine. Anyone who did what you did... do you realize what you saved on your ship? C.J. and Cass have only just now sent down some of the archives to the library. You've preserved the memory of your entire world. Of course you'll be fine. You're a hero. Heroes have the strength to carry on."

Anderson blinked at him, feeling a little stunned, and C.J. looked up at his father with a shining face.

"Did I tell you," he said conversationally, "that Dad's the head librarian of the Northern Hemisphere?"

"No," said Anderson, with enough dryness in his voice to make everyone laugh. He was still holding C.J.'s hand, and he brought it to his lips and kissed the back. "But I'm sure you would have," he added quietly.

C.J. nodded and smiled back, and for the span of a held breath, Anderson was absolutely positive that no one else in the world was real, because for a moment out of time, theirs were the only two heartbeats on the planet.

But it ended. C.J. stood up, and his family, including Dr. Cherry and Dr. Silverberg, all moved off to the edge of the yard. C.J. was about to bend down, and Anderson shook his head. "I can stand up," he said, trying to sound vital and active. "My brain is broken. My body works fine. You know I still swim every morning."

C.J. smiled and looked mildly surprised. "Yeah? You didn't tell me that."

Anderson furrowed his brow. "I'm not sure it's true," he confessed, squinting a little. He was going to try to explain that some mornings he got confused about the actual lap pool, instead of the small workout pool they'd had on the station, and the sense of space around his body made him flounder, lost in the echoes inside his head, but he left the edge of the sentence hanging too long, and C.J. burst into laughter.

It felt better to laugh with him for a moment, to forget that truth and reality were sometimes, at best, cold and distant cousins, than it would have to tell C.J. how far he really had to travel in order for them to walk side by side.

Anderson studied C.J. while he laughed—his head tilted back, his teeth gleaming whitely against his cocoa and milk colored skin. Anderson picked up his hand and studied the contrast—Anderson's paleness against C.J.'s darker,

almost golden tones.

“It’s sort of pretty,” he said, and mentally shooed Bobby away, because Bobby was cracking up at what a moron he sounded like.

C.J. smiled, though, but didn’t laugh. “You’re beautiful,” he said softly, and Anderson shook his head and added the important part.

“I’m broken.”

C.J. shrugged. “You’ll heal,” he said with such utter certainty that Anderson actually found himself tearing up. He shook the tears away before he could make the goodbye any harder and gave C.J. a hug. Standing up, he was aware, as he hadn’t been, of how good that body felt pressed up against his own, how protected and warm he’d felt in C.J.’s bed, in his life. Anderson tightened his arms and shuddered.

“Every night,” C.J. promised in his ear. “I’ll buzz you on the monitor every night. If it gets bad, just promise yourself you’ll make it through, okay? Every night.”

“Every night,” Anderson echoed. Then, because he had to, he said, “I love you, C.J.”

There was a gasp, and C.J.’s arms got so tight it was hard to breathe. “I love you too, baby. Get better, hear me?”

“Yeah.”

And then C.J. swung around and was surrounded by his family, and Anderson was left with Dr. Cherry and Dr. Silverberg to make sure he didn’t simply fall, like a sculpture made of water.

Wake up, eat breakfast, go swimming (if Kate and Bobby would let him), talk to Dr. Cherry—a.k.a. Jensen, whom Anderson was starting to suspect had known C.J. *very* well—eat lunch, meditate or read in the garden, talk to Dr. Silverberg—a.k.a. Molly, whom Anderson was starting to suspect knew Dr. Cherry *very* well—and then dinner.

And then talk to C.J.

“Hey, Anderson, how was your day?”

“Boring and monotonous. How was yours?”

You don’t ask us how our day went!

We were here the whole time, moron. He knows how our day went. Pretty

much the same as his.

I think we entertained each other more.

How come we never have sex anymore, Henry?

C.J.'s days were never boring and monotonous. There was always a non-humanoid interface or a ship that had started anthropomorphizing or a scuffle with his sister, who, apparently, was much easier to deal with now that she was back on the station with Marshall and getting laid on a regular basis. C.J. told Anderson about "Magic Marshall and his octo-peter" one night, and Anderson and company had pretty much giggled themselves to sleep. C.J. always had a story to tell, even if it was about how the coffee at his favorite kiosk had added a new spice and it made the whole world feel yummy.

Anderson watched him hungrily, his senses feeling oddly truncated and numb. He often found himself reaching for the computer, remembering those nights when the world came down to the feeling of C.J.'s flesh on his and the sound of his breathing in the dark.

Didn't you clowns write an algorithm that did that?

Yeah, but it was probably different in real life.

Which begs the question. If a simulated life is so real you can't tell the difference, is it simulated anymore?

Henry, please don't discuss post-modernist theory right now. It makes my head hurt.

Sorry, sweetheart. I forget.

Shh... listen. C.J. is talking some more.

"So, Anderson—you still with me?"

Anderson jerked his head away from the usual chaos in his brain and nodded. "Uhm, yeah."

"So I've been gone for about two weeks, and Jensen said you're not even *trying* to get better while I'm gone. He says it's like you're going through the motions." C.J.'s animated face had gotten a little rounder in the last two weeks, but now he started pinching around the eyes again. "That's not true, is it?" he asked quietly. "Because... I mean, Anderson, Jensen's about ready to tell me we can't talk at all."

The chorus in Anderson's head shut up in shock. "What do you mean, at all?"

C.J. shook his head. “Baby, he says it’s like I’m not even gone. It’s like... it’s like I’m holding you back. I’m your safety blanket, and you’re not letting go of me to feel if the rest of the world is real.” C.J.’s lower lip actually started to quiver. “He said... he said I’m like your new Alpha in your head.”

Oh hell no!

That’s not true!

Anderson, tell him he’s mistaken!

Oh, poor C.J.!

“You’re nothing like Alpha,” Anderson said numbly. Alpha was cruel and deceitful and used pain and intimidation to make Anderson comply. C.J. was... was kind and funny and... and *human* and....

“He’s saying that you think I’m... I’m a hologram, like Alpha. You’re letting me hold you together. Baby, you’ve got to start holding together for yourself.”

I thought I was the one holding us all together!

Anderson, ignore them all. Order is totally fucking overrated.

Interesting. I would have thought Dr. Cherry would have ascertained that Alpha was obviously a manifestation of Anderson’s will.

Anderson, you’re not holding us together?

Anderson squinted hard at C.J. on the screen and willed the voices to shut up. They ignored him. “You’re not Alpha,” he said numbly.

“Yeah, but... Anderson, don’t you miss touching me? You know that you’re not touching me anymore, right?”

Well yeah! The only sex going on is the sex between me and Kate.

Yeah, sorry about that, Anderson.

Since Anderson’s not heterosexual, that’s not even going to get him hard.

Henry, has he seen all the sex we’ve been having?

“I remember touching you, yes,” Anderson said, and he wasn’t trying to be funny, and he was thankful when C.J. saw his confusion for what it was.

“We did touch,” C.J. whispered. “We touched, and it was amazing. But it wasn’t perfect. You weren’t all there with me in my arms.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry!” C.J. snapped. “Be hurt or angry or... or insane or foaming at the mouth or something, but don’t be fucking sorry!”

Anderson gasped. It was the first time—the only time—he’d ever seen C.J. truly angry. “I’m... I’m... I’m....”

Well, he’s got a lot of nerve!

Apologize to him, Anderson!

Why do you think he’s angry?

Don’t make him yell at us!

“You’re what?” C.J. yelled. “You’re... you’re indifferent? You’re tired? You wish you’d never met me? You’re thinking about your family? You’re guilty? What? Because in two months, you haven’t given us a status report, dammit! You sit there and look at us serenely and say that yes, you know you’re crazy, and no, you don’t remember anything, but you *don’t tell anyone what’s going on inside your head!*”

“It’s... all white noise in here,” Anderson lied.

“*Shut. Up!*” C.J. snarled. Anderson recoiled, even though C.J. was two hundred thousand miles away.

Don’t be afraid. He’s not here.

Don’t you want him here?

Why would you be afraid of C.J.?

C.J. loves us.

“What did I—”

“You’re *lying* to me! You’ve been lying to Jensen this whole time, and to Molly and to... oh hell, maybe even to yourself. I was going to recreate your holodeck, do you know that?”

“Yes,” Anderson said numbly. “Your sister told me.”

“You didn’t want me to do that?”

“No.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“It wouldn’t help,” Anderson said. Every word was weighted with the opinion of the other voices in his head. It felt like the voices of everyone else he’d killed had added their sounds to the babble—the school, his teachers, the people he’d programmed for the amusement parks—all of them were weighing

in on what he should tell C.J., how he should fix this.

“How do you know that, Anderson? Because Jensen’s so fucking desperate he actually asked me if I wanted to try it again, and it almost killed me the last time I obsessed over it.”

“You can’t hurt yourself!” Anderson was not aware that he was standing up until he realized he couldn’t see C.J.’s face from this position. He had no mirror to know if the things he was feeling or saying were actually in sync.

“He can’t,” Anderson muttered. “He can’t hurt himself. He can’t.”

But if it will help you....

It won’t, genius. It won’t help him.

He looked so lost for a while. We can’t let C.J. do that, not when it won’t help.

Why won’t it help again?

“You’re not in there!” Anderson shouted, and C.J. was making noises on the other end of the computer screen.

“I’m not in where, Anderson?”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Anderson snapped, and he realized that he was agitated and that he wasn’t making sense and couldn’t seem to stop himself.

“Then who are you talking to?”

Don’t tell him.

He’ll only think you’re crazy.

Maybe he wants you to be crazy.

Wait, why can’t he know we’re here?

“No one,” Anderson muttered. “C.J., don’t recreate the holograms again. You can’t. You just can’t.”

“But you’re not getting better. You just keep it all in. You just hold everything you’re thinking or feeling there in your head. Anderson, anything we can do to get it out of your head, man, it’s got to be better than this!”

“What’s so wrong with this?” Anderson asked, hearing Risa whimper loudly in his head.

“Man, don’t you want to touch me?” C.J. asked, his voice too bald to be embarrassed or broken. “Don’t you miss the feeling of my hand in yours? Or even my hands on your body?”

“Yes.” Anderson nodded. “I miss the sound of your breathing. And your smell.”

“But don’t you want more? You can get the sound of my damned breathing from a brother or from a fucking recording, and you bought the damned soap I smelled like!” C.J. shook his head, and now the break set in. “Anderson... I love talking to you every night, but... I’m getting the same thing from you that I got when I was there. Don’t you miss me at all?”

Well, you really only knew him for two days....

Three months, moron, where were you?

Nearly four months. Am I the only one who can count?

It seems like forever.

“Yes,” Anderson whispered. “Yes.”

“But you don’t show it. I miss you every day, do you know that? I walk into my quarters and think, ‘Oh, he’s out, I wonder what he bought? I wonder what he saw? I wonder what I can say to make him laugh?’ And then I remember that you’re not here, and even if you were here, you wouldn’t be here, and....” C.J. rubbed his throat absently like he was trying to make something stop aching. “Man, my chest hurts. Does it feel like that for you?”

Eight and a half years, Anderson. We were your life for eight and a half years. Do you really want to dump us for him?

He wouldn’t be dumping us. Anderson doesn’t have to tell C.J. we’re here just to let him know how he feels.

You guys, even if we were real blood family, Anderson has the right to leave us when he’s found a compatible mate.

You fucking dorkuses! Don’t you see?

That’s not a word, Risa!

Who gives a fuck! He’s dying without C.J.! Are you so busy trying to be the loudest voice in his head that you can’t see that the outside of him is dying?

“Yes,” Anderson said through the confusion between his ears.

Anderson, don’t lie to him!

He’s not lying!

He’s hurting.

Come on, Bobby, don’t you want him to feel safe?

“I don’t believe you,” C.J. muttered. It was hard to read his expression. He looked hurt and furious, probably at himself.

You shouldn’t.

Anderson, make him believe you.

“I’m probably not even real to you, not even when I’m there,” C.J. said when Anderson didn’t answer.

He’s not.

You have to admit, you don’t dream about touching him nearly enough.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe you should live in your head some more.

That’s not what he’s saying.

“You’re real to me,” Anderson mumbled.

Really? Oh, shit. Now I’m a total asshole. I’m sorry.

Anderson, I don’t believe you, and I can see your brain. You need to make him believe you.

Kate’s right, Anderson. If you want him to believe you, you have to be louder about that.

Oh, C.J. Anderson, he’s heartbroken.

“God,” C.J. muttered, tilting his head back and squeezing his eyes tight. It dimly occurred to Anderson that he was crying. “I want to believe you. It’s hard for me, you know? It would be hard to be apart anyway. That’s why I haven’t tried the long-term thing up here, right? But... you used to be so animated, you know? For two months I lived to watch you laugh. Now I’d settle to see you get pissed off. I just... I just need....”

“What?”

Why does it matter? It’s not like he’s any more real than Alpha.

Yeah, that’s a possibility. You know, maybe he’s not real. Maybe that is the problem.

Well, Alpha wasn’t real. Maybe C.J. is a hologram too.

He’s real.

“I just need to know you know I’m real!”

“I do.”

You do not.

If he was real, wouldn't he be beating the crap out of you?

If he was real, would he have left?

He's real.

"That doesn't sound very convincing!"

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

You don't have to do anything. You lived without him before.

Hey, he's the one who left you.

And wouldn't it be nice not to have to worry about what he would do if he got angry?

He's angry now, and he's hurt, and he's real!

"Be emotional! Show me something here! God help me, Anderson, throw a guy a fucking bone!"

"I... I... I...."

We what?

"What are you trying to say, baby? I'm just... I don't mean to sound like such a dick here, but... I'm hurting. Okay. I'm sorry. I should have dumped this on your lap when I was downplanet, but I don't think I could even admit to myself that it was happening. That it hurt. It was easier to focus on being there for you. I'll... hell. I'll sign off. I'll see you tomorrow."

"No!" Anderson was panicked. Suddenly, this imaginary conference, this tenuous connection of satellite signals and radio waves, seemed more real and more important than ten years of his own existence bouncing around like a tiny pebble in a big box.

"No what?"

No, he's not real?

No, you don't want to keep doing this?

No, you don't believe he'll be there for you since you left?

NO, DON'T LET HIM GO!

"No... don't... don't go! No... just... I mean... God. Don't... I need you. I need you. Even if it's just a picture at night, or a conversation, or... you're not the voice in my head. You're not Kate or Bobby or Henry or Risa. You're not Alpha. You're different. I don't know what to expect from you. You're the only person I want to talk to. You're... please don't go."

Anderson, do you mean that? You don't mean that.

Anderson, we like him, okay? But this is totally upsetting you.

I'm still not convinced that he's real. The likelihood that this transmission is just another hallucination is astronomical. Anderson, could you....

“Shut up! All of you! He's real and I need to be alone!”

For a moment, Anderson thought it had been Risa who had spoken. Her tiny voice, the one that most often said the truths no one wanted to hear—she'd been the one advocating for C.J.—*she'd* been the one who didn't want him to go.

But then Anderson realized that he'd fallen to his knees, and that his throat was raw from shouting, and that for the first time since Alpha had ceased to exist, the voices in his own head were silent. All that remained was what he wanted, how he felt, and who he wanted with him.

“Anderson?” C.J.'s voice through the monitor was all suppressed panic. Anderson had no doubt that C.J. had probably contacted Dr. Cherry on another monitor, and that his time alone—so hard won—would be cut short. He also thought vaguely that maybe it would be a while before he could talk to C.J. again period.

“C.J.,” Anderson muttered, looking up to the desk in his aesthetic little room at the mental care facility, and not, for the first time in two months, from the holodeck of the shuttle, where he felt like he'd never disembarked. “C.J., don't give up on me. I've got... I've got a fucking chorus of idiots in my head, man. They won't shut up, and I didn't want to tell anyone they were there because then I'd *really* be crazy, and then you'd never want me. But I can't lose you. You... you are the lover I never would have programmed. You are a person who's so amazing, not even the things I imagined could have imagined you. I can't lose you. I know you're real. And I know that's not a good enough reason for you to hang in there, but....” There was a banging at the door, and still, C.J.'s voice was the only one that Anderson could hear.

“I won't give up,” C.J. said softly. He had reached out and put his fingertips on his own vid screen, and Anderson pulled himself to his knees and leaned over the desk, doing the same.

“You don't give up, I won't give up,” Anderson said, and rested his cheek against the cool veneer of the wooden desk. He felt strangely exhausted, like he hadn't just gone round and round in his head but round and round in a mass melee in real life too.

“You look....” C.J. swallowed—Anderson could even see it on the

monitor, and he abruptly wanted to be there to touch C.J. so badly he couldn't even stand to think about it or the idea would hurt his skin. "You look... you look sad, and angry, and tired," he finished.

"All of that?"

"Yeah, it's the best thing I've seen on your face in two months."

"Well, no offense, man, but I think it's just as well you don't get to see what I'm about to look like in therapy."

C.J.'s smile was crooked. "I think I just did. No worries. Have I mentioned I'm here for the long haul?"

Anderson waited for the cacophony in his head to assure him that C.J. wasn't the only one. It didn't come.

"I'm glad," Anderson muttered. "You could be the only one."

Dr. Cherry came in then and looked through the monitor as he bent down to assist Anderson to a place where he could sit. "Hey, C.J.," he said, his voice a study in forced cheerfulness.

"Hey, Jensen. He going to be all right?"

"Maybe," Dr... Jensen said, his pleasant voice throaty. "Maybe. Anderson, can you say goodbye to C.J. for a bit? I think you and me, we got some actual truth-telling in our future, okay?"

"Yeah," Anderson mumbled, his face wet and sticky against the desk. "Yeah. C.J., I love you. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Guaran-damned-teed. Love you too."

Jensen very gently turned off the monitor and then wrapped his arms around Anderson's shoulders and simply held him, very quietly, while Anderson went limp against him, as emotionally exhausted as he could remember without being sick or in denial or dizzy with his own creations dancing macabre in his brain space.

Jensen's arms were warm, and male, and neutral, but that was not what Anderson felt. He felt C.J., that last day, that final hug, his unspoken wish for the real Anderson in his arms, and not the blank, neutral, emotionless holo-dummy that he'd become.

Maybe, just maybe, Anderson could be that person. It was that hope that let him close his eyes and sleep without sedation, and that hope that kept him from screaming when the dreams came.

It was a start.

Part 6: C.J.

Chapter 19

The Day I Met You

“C.J., MAN, you look nervous.”

C.J. swallowed and looked at Julio, feeling self-conscious. “I am nervous,” he admitted as they watched Hermes-Eight-Prime get nearer in the window of the planet-to-station shuttle.

“It’s not like your first date.” Julio grinned, and C.J. looked at him seriously.

“The hell it’s not,” he murmured, feeling it in his gut.

Anderson’s breakthrough over the monitors had been the beginning, but only that. The rest had been long and hard, and a lot of C.J.’s free time on the station had been spent on the monitors with Anderson and with Jensen and even with Molly. It had been painful, but not as painful as the pale imitation of Anderson who had taken up residence in his body for the weeks after killing Alpha.

C.J. hadn’t really seen it until after Cassie had come and ordered him to step away from the hologram repair and back into the real world, but she, and Jensen, and Molly, and their mother, who had more degrees than Cassie in psychology and neural function in space, all agreed that something was going on in Anderson’s head that he wasn’t talking about. They also agreed that the thing he wasn’t talking about was taking up most of his energy—energy that he should have been using confronting all of the other painful things he had to deal with but wasn’t.

That night—that terrible night, when C.J. had felt like it was all for nothing, like the Anderson he’d known had just been the *potential* of the man he’d fallen in love with, a mirage, a promise that had been destroyed along with

the mining colony nearly eleven years ago—that had been the catalyst of change.

Anderson had been unavailable for about a week after that, and C.J. had worried every day, in spite of reassurance from Jensen that what was going on planetside was *very* encouraging.

“Kay, I’m not going to give too many details, because that’s his biz, C.J., but I’ve got to tell you, you know all those people we thought he’d killed?”

“Yeah.”

“They were hanging out in his head the whole time.”

C.J. had taken a moment to digest this and realized he couldn’t. “Sounds crowded,” he’d said through a dry throat, and Jensen had nodded emphatically.

“Hard to respond to the real world when all your baggage is sounding off in your head.”

C.J. had closed his eyes, not sure whether to be relieved or to give up hope altogether. “How can he function like that?” he had asked painfully, and Jensen had given him his first real, clear, sunshiney moment since Anderson had first disembarked and C.J. had thought, *Yeah, he’s a pretty kid—too bad he’s hands off!*

“He wasn’t. He was nonresponsive and apathetic, and you saw that. But now that we know they’re there, we can figure out how to make them shut up.”

C.J. had wrinkled his brow. “Okay, but... I don’t understand. If he’s got everybody in his head, why didn’t Alpha just shut them all down? Isn’t that what he did?”

Jensen had grinned then, and C.J. had gotten his *second* sunshiney moment in a while. “See, that’s the good thing. Wait, no, that’s the *great* thing. He killed Alpha. That was an active choice. Everything in Alpha that helped Anderson survive, that’s still in him. The bad parts?” Jensen had shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Well, they’re in us all, right? This guy was just distilled asshole. The attractive and the violent and the charismatic parts of us that everyone has but most people put a fucking leash on so we don’t wipe each other out on sight. It was the part that made Anderson stop dithering and make the hard choices. But you can’t put all that in the same guy without any of the softer stuff or the happy stuff....”

“The Risas or the Bobbys....”

“Or the Kates or the Henrys.” Jensen had nodded, serious now. “Exactly right. Man, this is what I was talking about. Anderson made the holodeck, and it

was brilliant. But really, all that thing boiled down to was an expensive, hi-tech way for a lost kid to talk to himself. He's got other people to talk to now—he's got to relearn how to do that."

C.J. had nodded, but something must have happened to his expression then, because his friend's voice was tender when Jensen spoke next.

"You're first on the list, C.J.—don't ever doubt it."

C.J.'s smile back had been all joy.

A couple of days later, Anderson had been on the monitor, and he had been grumpy. "Jesus, swimming. Really? They can't think of anything better?"

C.J. had grinned. "You strain yourself?"

Anderson had shaken his head and looked embarrassed. "It's practically a sensory deprivation tank. You should *hear* what goes on inside my head when I'm trying to work out."

He couldn't help it. C.J. had burst into raucous, joyous laughter, and Anderson had glared at him through two hundred thousand miles of space. "What in the hell?"

"Man—I'm just so damned happy to see you pissed off. You will never fucking know!"

There had been a pause, a moment of shock on Anderson's face, and then he'd grimaced. "Well, get used to it. I have the feeling I'm sort of a handful when I get my full personality back. I was *not* a good boy, and Alpha had to come from somewhere."

C.J.'s smile had been all wicked then. "I'm looking forward to seeing you when you're really, really bad," he had purred, and Anderson had blushed. "But how do you know you weren't a good boy?" Because Anderson hadn't spoken once—not once—about his family, his life before the shuttle, even when he'd first arrived at the station.

Anderson's face suddenly turned into a study in sadness and memory. "I read the letters, the ones in my tablet, the ones with my family. They were...." C.J. could see him swallow. "They were hard. But... you know what?"

"What?"

"I was really loved. My family was really wonderful, and I was really loved."

C.J.'s eyes had burned. "Yeah. Yeah, baby, you were."

“I think they’d really want me to be happy.”

“I think you’re right.”

They had talked some more before they signed off, but that right there had marked the beginning of hope—and the beginning of Anderson, in a way.

C.J. had seen glimpses of him. He’d seen Bobby’s raucous humor, Kate’s brusque practicality, Henry’s analytical abilities, and Risa’s childlike introspection. He’d seen Alpha’s inability to accept defeat. But he hadn’t seen Anderson, not all of him, until that moment, when Anderson had started a morning grumpy and finished a conversation sad.

He was... breathtaking.

C.J. had started out contacting Anderson with a terrible, stomach-dropping anticipation. Maybe, *maybe* this would be the day Anderson would show a sign of life, would be animated, would... would give him hope. After the day he lost his temper—something that happened, even Cassidy would verify, about once in a double-moon eclipse—C.J. had more than hope.

Now C.J. had a friend to talk to, a companion, and a memory of a night, a painful, passionate, sinful night that had the promise of turning into many nights that held tenderness and humor as well as passion.

He had the promise of a life with someone he loved. Someone, he knew now, he would follow, he would fight for, and he was worthy of.

God... it was almost a good thing that realization had happened when he was off-planet and Anderson was downside. It was a terrifying idea. C.J. thought that if he hadn’t had those heartbeats of space between transmissions to Anderson, he might have fucked up the relationship out of sheer, unadulterated fear.

As it was, he lived for the promise of it with stomach-dropping exhilaration.

He’d watched his monitor, starving for the sight of Anderson’s face, and saw a minor miracle of transformation. There were still bad days—enough to be frightening—when Anderson’s voice was flat and his attention was very clearly elsewhere. But at the end of those days, there would be an apology and sometimes even an outrageous comment that would take C.J. by surprise.

“Anderson, buddy, I’ve got to sign off. Another shipment of those ice-piss lizards is due in tomorrow, and this time, Marshall and I want the whole station on alert.”

Anderson's rather serene blank countenance had suddenly found focus. "I'm sorry I've been out of it, C.J., but Bobby wanted to know if humans pissed on the floor after the ice-piss lizards, if maybe the heat differential wouldn't melt the ice and fix the problem."

C.J. goggled and then wrinkled his nose. "Oh, Jesus, Anderson—did you hear what you just said?"

Anderson blinked, and then found his first complete expression of the day. "Oh God, that's horrible! Ewwww! I'm so sorry, man. Shit like that is why we all need a superego, isn't it?"

C.J. had giggled then and said, "Yeah, well, in your case, tell Kate to step up her game!"

It had been Anderson's turn to giggle. C.J. had still needed to log off, but the moment remained as one of the bright spots to remind him that it was a process, and it wasn't going to happen overnight.

It hadn't. It was still not done. But C.J. was going to see him for real—for *real*—and Anderson was going to be himself. Even on the bad days, he was still going to be himself, and C.J. was going to get to be there.

What if C.J. wasn't good enough?

He'd been surprisingly happy (and surprisingly competent) at his new job. Marshall had complimented him like a grade school teacher until C.J. had complained.

"Man, would you be saying this shit to other seconds, Marshall? I feel like your student or something!"

"Quite frankly, C.J., I've had such a stunning string of spectacular failures, this is all completely sincere. I'm just thrilled you're neither a complete fuck-up nor a complete psycho. Take the praise and run with it, little brother. I'm fucking glad to have you on board!"

God, C.J. loved Marshall.

But what about this? C.J. had failed the one big relationship he'd ever had, and hell, given the way he and Jensen had managed to stay in each other's bed for years, he'd even failed at ending it. The nature of that had changed from backup lover to buddy-in-orgy when Molly had arrived, but still, C.J.'s track record wasn't great.

He wanted to be worthy. Anderson had been a bloody goddamned hero when he'd arrived at the station, and he was a fucking miracle now. C.J. just

wanted to be worthy of that. Was that so much to ask?

He was about to find out. He'd been squirming in his seat like he had to pee for the last two hours of the trip, and now the shuttle was about to land.

C.J. STEPPED down the ramp and into the off-planet terminal, looking around. Jensen had said either he or Molly would come to do the meet-'n-greet and drive C.J. to his bungalow, but the two of them actually had better things to do, and more than once, C.J. had been greeted by a message to take a hover-cab.

He saw the usual press of people, but no Jensen, and Molly's hair was pretty hard to miss, so he sighed, hefted his overnight bag over one shoulder, and picked up his suitcase with the other hand. He'd taken two steps toward the walkway, where the crowd thinned out, when he heard his name.

"C.J.! C.J.! Ceeeeeeee-Jaaaaaaaayyy, look over here!"

C.J. turned, half grinning already because he *knew* that voice, but he was still unprepared for Anderson charging full tilt across the shuttle exchange, throwing himself at C.J. and climbing him like a tree.

C.J. had just enough presence of mind to cup his ass—tight and muscular now—and open his mouth to say hi when Anderson kissed him, openmouthed, uninhibited, tongue thrusting into C.J.'s mouth, making sexy little whimpers in his throat for about a thousand years, and when C.J. pulled back, panting, his groin swollen against Anderson's, he had just enough time to catch his breath before he had to taste again.

This time he thrust *his* tongue inside and tangled them together, and God, did Anderson taste like everything C.J. needed. Something spicy and sweet and bold and soft—and he wanted C.J.—wanted him badly, and C.J. didn't have a reason in the world to say no.

"God...." C.J. pulled away and leaned his forehead against Anderson's, letting Anderson's legs slide down around his legs until Anderson's feet touched the ground. "Jesus, you gained weight!"

Anderson laughed, breathing hard, and for a moment, they were the only two people in the entire shuttle-port, or the entire solar system, or even the entire galaxy, and in that moment, that was just fine.

Eventually they straightened and grinned stupidly at each other.

"So I take it you're allowed off the grounds now," C.J. said gratefully.

Anderson nodded and picked up the suitcase that had fallen by his side, and C.J. let him. “I’ve been taking how-to-be-a-grown-up on Hermes-Eight lessons,” Anderson said, his eyes twinkling.

“Yeah, like what?”

“Well, I’ve got a two-person hover license!” God, he was cute—as excited as a child.

“Nice,” C.J. said, nodding encouragingly.

“And I learned where the grocery stores were and how to shop—and that was sort of a big furry deal, by the way. We had a communal grocery outlet on the mining colony. This was a lot different. Do you *know* how much junk food you can buy at a grocery *store*? At the outlet, they used to monitor, so they knew when Mom had the right ratio of vegetables to protein to carbs. It was pretty intense, but *here*, we can buy *anything*. And so I went shopping with Molly, so we could stock your fridge for when you got home, and I bought some of your favorite stuff. She said you can cook pretty well, so we got the ingredients for some of the stuff she said you like to make and—”

“Uhm, Anderson?”

“Yeah?”

“How much soda and candy have you eaten?”

Anderson belched and grinned at him. “Enough to make a ten-year-old sick for a week.”

C.J. laughed all the way out to the parking lot. Sure enough, Jensen had pulled C.J.’s hovercraft out of storage, and Anderson had a key-card.

The day was blindingly hot. It was high summer in the northern hemisphere, so Anderson had the top up, and he loaded C.J.’s luggage in the back after starting the airflow system to keep things cooler. For C.J.’s part, after the recycled air (helped by the atrium, of course) of the space station, it didn’t matter whether he was planetside in the height of summer or depths of winter, he was always happiest with the windows open.

Anderson drove like the brand new driver he was—he skidded in too rough to the stops, revved the hover too hard for the starts, and went too fast in between. C.J. loved it—he flipped through the monitor at his wrist and tuned it with the hover’s sound system, playing one of the songs he’d heard from Anderson’s archives as loud as was polite for the neighborhood, and Anderson just kept on driving.

They skidded into C.J.'s yard and put the hover in the shed, grabbed the luggage, and walked across the lawn to the bungalow. C.J. looked around the nice, level field of green-blue grass indigenous to Hermes-Eight and then glanced at Anderson.

"You didn't happen to mow my lawn, did you? Because Jensen's supposed to, and he always forgets and then blames some poor teenager, who's just trying to earn extra creds while he's going to university, for bailing. It's perfect this time. He made you do it, didn't he?"

Anderson barely looked at him. "I volunteered, but yeah." Anderson glanced up and grimaced. "I'm sorry, I was trying to remember that song you were playing. We had it on the ship, didn't we?"

C.J. nodded, scanned his wrist monitor to unlock his door, and let them both in. The place had been aired out since he left, and his back relaxed a few notches as he gave a little sigh of contentment. God, he loved his little home. It hadn't felt like he'd really enjoyed his last month here, and that was a shame, because he loved planetside almost as much as he loved stationside. Marshall was talking about moving to a ten-week-on, six-week-off schedule, with a slight decrease in pay, and C.J. thought he wouldn't mind doing that, especially if he got to spend his six weeks off with Anderson.

But first, they had to get through this month.

"You had a lot of music on the ship," C.J. said now, in response to Anderson's question. "Music must have been really important to your colony. Your cache of recordings of old music from across the populated worlds was bigger than the one here, and your own musicians..." C.J. shook his head in admiration. "Well, you had a lot of them, and they were amazing. Jeez, Anderson, you cannot *believe* how grateful all the universities here are for what you preserved. You've got money coming in from all over, you know that, right?"

Anderson's smile was small and a little embarrassed. "That's not why I did it."

C.J. leaned into him and looked at him sideways and saw that Anderson was looking at him the same way. "I know why you did it," C.J. said quietly. "And why you did it doesn't make it any less remarkable, okay? So be proud of that. Be proud of what you saved and the people you came from. Mining colonies are heroes here on Hermes-Eight. You brought that to life for us, made it real and beautiful and terrible and sad and amazing. Be proud, Anderson. Don't make what you did small because you were a scared kid who didn't want

to lose one moment of your world. That's one of the things that makes it great."

Anderson grimaced then and frowned a little but didn't answer.

"What?" C.J. prodded.

"I'm waiting to see what anyone has to say about it."

"What does Anderson have to say?"

Anderson turned a beaming smile to him, like sunshine through a storm. "Anderson says thank you," he said dryly, and C.J. smiled back and kissed him through the rain.

It was supposed to be a short kiss, an affirmation type kiss, the kind where you can kiss once and then move on with the rest of the little details in life. Except all it took was one taste, Anderson's gasp, his open mouth, and C.J. was suddenly hard and in need like he couldn't remember being in need in his life.

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about Anderson—a lot of time in his bed, alone, with his cock in his hand and a properly lubricated adult toy wedging him open and vulnerable with the fine edge of pain that Anderson's size had given him—and all those moments, all of those wishes for the real Anderson, for a time when their bodies might be naked and real and raw together, without the twisted coils of identity and duty, tangling up their breath and their sex were all... all right here, kissing him back with increasing desperation.

Anderson gasped and thrust his hands under C.J.'s shirt, and C.J. whined a little. Oh... oh God... to be touched. He bunched Anderson's knitted tank and pulled it out of his tight, clinging leggings—Anderson did like to show off his slim build, didn't he?—and slid his hands under Anderson's pants just to cup those taut little butt-cheeks in the palm of his hand and pull Anderson's groin up against his thigh.

Anderson groaned and thrust his hips closer.

"Anderson?"

"Hmmm... oh... oh God...." Anderson was grinding up against C.J.'s thigh with such insistence that C.J. thought he'd come in a moment, and C.J. wanted him deep and hard in C.J.'s mouth before that happened.

"Do you... did Jensen say you could...?"

"Yes," Anderson grunted, glaring because C.J. had stopped massaging Anderson's ass with his hands. His expressive brown eyes could narrow to amazingly dangerous slits when he was irritated, and C.J. pressed his thigh against Anderson's swollen erection teasingly.

“Yes what?” C.J. insisted, not wanting to push this when it shouldn’t be pushed.

“Yes, you can fuck me as often as you want,” Anderson whispered wickedly, and C.J. had to clench his entire lower body to keep from coming right then.

“Oh thank God,” C.J. muttered, and Jensen was forgotten as he kissed Anderson again and again, loving the softness of that lush little mouth and the sweetly accepting way he opened that mouth like he could inhale C.J. whole.

C.J. let him grind, just a little, just until C.J. managed the elastic and hook-and-eye fly of the tight, stretchy pants. “Now stop that,” C.J. cautioned. “It’s been nearly five months, Anderson, if you’re going to come, you’re going to come in my mouth.”

Anderson nodded obediently, and C.J. shucked those clingy pants down to Anderson’s ankles and welcomed the weight when Anderson put his hands on C.J.’s shoulders to kick out of them, right in C.J.’s living room. C.J. fell to his knees and looked up for a moment, rubbing his palms on Anderson’s furry blond thighs.

“What?” Anderson peered down at him. He half-closed his eyes and shuddered when C.J. took his jutting cock in a long-fingered hand and squeezed.

“You’re so beautiful in the sunlight,” C.J. murmured, and then he opened his mouth wide, pulled his lips over his teeth, and pulled the head of Anderson’s cock into his mouth, pushing the foreskin back with his lips as he went.

It tasted *so* good. He sucked harder, pulling it into the back of his mouth, and swallowed so it could go deeper. Anderson’s fingers grappled through the tight, tiny coils of C.J.’s hair, and C.J. pulled back until only the crown was between his lips, hollowed his cheeks, sucked and squeezed at the same time.

“Auughhh... God....” Anderson’s choked groan was punctuated with an involuntary thrust of his hips.

C.J. was ready, and he opened his mouth just enough to catch the thrust all the way in the back of his throat and then used his hand around the base and squeezed.

“Oh, God... C.J., I’m *so* gonna come....”

C.J. pulled his head back and used his fist to pull the last of the foreskin down over the head, teasing it with his tongue when it appeared.

Anderson’s hips bucked again, and he panted, “I can’t stand up... dammit,

C.J.....”

C.J. pushed gently and knee-walked Anderson back to the couch, where Anderson splayed, wanton and eager, and C.J. had his body all to himself.

Anderson was shimmying on the couch, thrusting his hips into the cushions and out even while he waited for C.J. to get close enough to take him into his mouth again.

C.J. stopped between his spread thighs and caught those undulating hips in his wide-fingered hands. “Stop,” he whispered, his breath cooling the skin of Anderson’s wet cockhead. Anderson was completely erect, the foreskin retracted and the tender skin beneath the crown exposed, pink, and glistening.

Anderson froze his hips back against the couch, letting a little grunt of frustration escape as he looked down his body with big, needing eyes. “What are you waiting for?” he begged.

C.J. smiled and rubbed his cheek against the shaft of Anderson’s cock. “I’m worshipping you a little.”

“Worshipping?” Anderson’s voice hitched in the middle and rose to a whine at the end as C.J. snuck out a pink tongue around the crown.

“Worshipping.” C.J. licked up carefully, squeezing Anderson at his base, and was rewarded when Anderson pressed his head against the couch and arched his back, gasping with the effort of not thrusting his hips.

“Oh geez... C.J... stop *worshipping* and start *sucking*!”

C.J. laughed wickedly and licked again, slowly, and again, and again, and again. “No,” he said, his eyes crinkling as he looked up at Anderson, writhing at being teased.

“No?” Anderson panted. “No? Oh, God... C.J....”

“Make me?”

Anderson’s breath caught, and his hips thrust, and C.J. had just enough time to cup his mouth over the end of Anderson’s cock and pull the fine, thick, marble length into his mouth and swallow as Anderson spewed hot and bitter into the back of his throat. C.J. swallowed, his own body thrusting against the couch without control, and when Anderson gave an aggressive thrust and screamed, C.J. had to clutch Anderson’s thighs with both arms as the convulsive white-blindness of orgasm shook his body.

When Anderson was done and still twitching in aftermath, C.J. moved up a little and rested his cheek on the softness of Anderson’s stomach. His muscles

were defined there, but not cut or hard, and the skin was white and silky. Anderson rubbed C.J.'s head with all of the tenderness that C.J. had dreamed of that first, epic, failed time that they'd been together.

"Would you, uhm... do you want to finish?" he asked, and C.J. looked up in time to see that shy, predatory expression in those wide brown eyes that had so beguiled him from that very first day.

C.J. smiled and let his shoulders shake once with laughter. "Who says I didn't?" he asked wryly and wriggled a little because the come that had scalded his skin was turning clammy on the inside of his faux-denim jeans.

"No!"

C.J. blushed. "Yes," he affirmed. "I, uhm... well, it's been a while."

"But...."

"But I've been dreaming about touching you like that since... since you stepped off the shuttle."

Anderson's eyes crinkled a little at the corners, and his hand on C.J.'s head moved to his cheek. "That wasn't the first time we...."

"Yeah, it was," C.J. said, feeling foolish but also knowing this was true. "It was the first time we made love. The first time... I guess the first time you know who it really was touching you, and you... you came, and you knew me, and you were completely yourself."

Anderson moved his thumb to brush C.J.'s cheek. "That must have been so hard for you," he said quietly. "I... I didn't mean to use you."

C.J. nodded and hoped Anderson would never see the shadow of hurt that knowledge had left. He'd seen that last recording with Alpha, when Anderson had used the physical proof of their sex to prove to Alpha that he wasn't real, that he could be defeated. He'd understood—all of it. He'd understood that while Anderson, parts of him, might have loved C.J., so much of the man had been tangled up in the mess in his head. Anderson hadn't been truly capable of love, not while Alpha had still haunted the remains of Anderson's imaginary world made real.

But knowing wasn't feeling. C.J. had *felt* hurt. He hadn't ever wanted to tell Anderson how hard it had been to acknowledge his relatively small part in everything Anderson had gone through that night, everything that Anderson had felt.

"I know you didn't," C.J. said now, and Anderson looked at him sharply.

“I hurt you really badly, didn’t I?”

C.J. swallowed. “It wasn’t your fault, Anderson. You don’t owe me anything, okay?”

“Why did you say it?”

“Make me?”

“Yeah.”

C.J. smiled a little. “Because I saw the recordings, baby. I know that’s what you want to do, not mean, just... just forceful. You really *are* Alpha, you know that?”

Anderson’s lax, happy body stiffened underneath him, and C.J. cursed himself.

“The good parts, not the horrible parts at the end.” He sat up on his knees and grasped Anderson’s chin when Anderson dropped the hand on C.J.’s cheek and looked away. “I know it’s unfair. I know that I’m privy to all sorts of things about you that maybe you don’t want *anybody*, not even Jensen, to know. But the thing is, I *do* know these things. And you may think they’re all twisted things, because you were trying to forge a world out of what’s between your ears, but they’re not twisted. They’re not. I *read* your letters when you were a boy, and I know you have, right?”

Anderson nodded, still not looking at him, and C.J. plastered his body over Anderson’s bare skin, making it very clear that Anderson couldn’t lose him.

“I need to say this, baby, because you need to hear it. You were an absolutely *horrible* little kid!”

Anderson turned to him with an open mouth and eyes sparking in outrage, and C.J. actually laughed.

“It’s *true*. You were hell on wheels with a bucket of worms!”

Anderson blinked for a moment, and then, as though the memory had been allowed to flicker behind his eyes, he smiled—just the tiniest smile, it was true, but it eased the Herculean hug of muscle around C.J.’s chest that had been cutting off his air since he’d started talking.

“Yeah?” Anderson asked, sounding honestly curious.

“Yeah!” C.J. smiled. “You were. You still are. You’re a leader, Anderson. You’re stronger than any one man has the right to be.”

Anderson put his hand back on C.J.’s cheek, and C.J. closed his eyes and

leaned into the touch. For a moment there, he'd thought he'd destroyed it all, all the work, all the patience, with one revelation of too much truth. He should have known, he should have remembered from his time with Jensen, that it took more than that. If two people truly cared for each other, it either took an act of will or an act of apathy to split them up.

"That doesn't frighten you?" Anderson whispered, and C.J. shook his head.

"No."

"If Alpha was a part of me...."

C.J. grinned. "Anderson? You know, I was a *really* rotten kid too. You know who I got it from?"

Now it was Anderson's turn to grin. "Cassidy?"

"Damned straight." It was time to stop grinning into his bottomless brown eyes like an idiot. "I know Jensen's told you this. Are you going to make me say it?"

Anderson's look was direct now, not flirtatious, not stalking—head on. Just like his nemesis, except unlike the flat gray gaze of Alpha, Anderson had kindness, warmth, and humor in his brown eyes. "We all have Alpha in us," Anderson said quietly, as though reciting a well-worn lesson. "We all have the leader, the guy who can force us to make the shit decisions. We all have the ability to mistreat people. What matters is that we don't."

C.J. nodded. "You know," he said sincerely, "you could have seduced me a lot earlier up at the space station. Why didn't you?"

Anderson closed his eyes, and C.J. turned his head to kiss that pale, warm palm resting on his cheek. "Because you didn't think it was right. I didn't want to hurt you."

"You're *so* not Alpha." He smiled again, wickedly. "Except, maybe, in one teeny-tiny, big, thick, long, and well-endowed way."

Anderson's grin was three times as wicked as C.J.'s, and under his stomach, through his come-clammy jeans, C.J. felt Anderson's cock throb.

"Are you sure?"

C.J. wanted him so badly, wanted that force, that dominance, that proud, unapologetic *maleness* so badly he might have said almost anything—but he couldn't do that to Anderson. "Take me for a test ride," he said, totally serious. "Let's see."

Anderson closed his eyes and shuddered. “Really?”

“Really.”

Anderson leaned forward, arching his hips so that C.J., lying on his chest, was that much closer to his pouty, lush little mouth, and placed his lips near C.J.’s ear. “You want it up your ass again, don’t you.”

C.J. closed his eyes and shuddered, his entire body going boneless, his own erection resurrecting in his pants. “God, yes.”

Anderson licked the outer rim of his ear delicately. “Do you want to clean up?”

“Ye—ah!” Because Anderson’s other hand slid down C.J.’s back and bunched up his shirt, then went straight for the bare skin of C.J.’s ass under his jeans.

“Too bad,” Anderson hissed. “Take off your clothes. Now.”

C.J. had spent three months taking up the burdens of being a good leader, conferring with Jensen for what was best for Anderson’s care, taking the initiative and giving orders and being the grown-up. Anderson, who had literally been captaining his own ship since the age of twelve, had spent five months feeling helpless and weak in the face of his own flaws.

The reversal between leader and follower in this moment was as simple and as electric as throwing a switch.

C.J. stood up immediately and started unbuttoning the overshirt he wore over his knit tank.

Anderson watched him with sleepy eyes, pulling off the rest of his own clothes without ceremony. “Faster,” he murmured throatily, and C.J. followed his example, and then dropped his hands to his jeans and popped the top snap. Anderson’s eyes narrowed impatiently, and C.J. just dragged the whole works down to his ankles, kicking off his slip-on skids and toeing off his socks as the whole works slid down.

He was left, naked and erect, standing in his own living room, waiting to see what his lover, the man he’d been waiting for, would do next.

Anderson didn’t disappoint. He rummaged in the little satchel that had been around his waist before C.J. had stripped off his pants, and came up with the unmistakable clear tube. He pressed it into C.J.’s hand as he scooted forward, naked and erect himself, on the couch.

“Make yourself ready,” he said quietly. “Stretched, ready... needy. When I

take you, I'm not going to be screwing around, right?"

C.J.'s hand shook as he dumped lubricant on his fingers and then moved his hand behind him. Anderson smiled up at him, their positions reversed, the man in charge kneeling at the other's feet in order to render the other man vulnerable. Anderson's lips touched the head of C.J.'s cock just as C.J.'s fingers brushed his tight ring of muscle, and C.J. wondered if his knees could hold him any better than Anderson's had borne *him* up.

Anderson wrapped his arms around the backs of C.J.'s thighs and pulled C.J.'s cock completely into his mouth with a groan of satisfaction that C.J. felt down to his toes. C.J. grunted, holding onto Anderson's shoulder with one hand and thrusting one finger into his asshole with the other. His thighs started to tremble, and Anderson pulled back for a moment, letting C.J.'s cock bob against his face.

"How are you doing?"

"Gonna...." The second finger breached, and C.J. grunted in pleasure and the dark edge of pain. "Can't stand too long. Sorry...."

Anderson stood up and whispered, "Keep your fingers where they are!" before positioning C.J. so he was on the couch, his knees on the cushions and his cheek resting on the back pillow space.

With a little help from Anderson, his fingers had remained, plunging, wiggling, tantalizing his backside while he squatted, waiting for Anderson to do what he wanted, to take over and exercise his considerable will.

Anderson pulled his fingers away, and C.J. moaned at their loss. Then Anderson nibbled at the back of his neck and murmured, "Stroke yourself, C.J. I want you to come."

"On the couch?" A little bit of reality intruded, and Anderson swore.

Anderson's knitted shirt was stuffed into C.J.'s other hand, and Anderson muttered, "How's that?"

"Good enough to come in," C.J. told him, and then shoved it in the couch so he could aim his cock at the come-rag.

He started stroking, closing his eyes, reveling in Anderson's butterfly kisses down his spine, under his shoulders, at his ribs, but his balls suddenly tightened between his legs, and when Anderson reached under him and brushed them from behind, C.J. actually broke into a sweat with the effort not to come.

"Anderson," he begged, his voice thready with need, and Anderson

nuzzled his neck, the front of his body plastered up against C.J.'s back in a way that was both reassuring and inflaming.

"I hear you, baby," Anderson murmured, and C.J. felt him, engorged and thick, at his entrance, and suddenly C.J.'s entire body, his entire being, was centered around that giant, exquisite, stretching/full/painful/wonderful invasion by Anderson's cock.

"*Gaaaawwww... yes!*" C.J. screamed as Anderson wedged himself inside, and then, as his crown popped in place, disappearing into C.J.'s body, "*Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes... all of it! Now! Oh, God, Anderson, fuck me harder!*"

Anderson pulled back and then thrust forward, and C.J. screamed into the back of the couch in joy.

"You like that?" Anderson asked, and C.J. felt droplets of sweat fall onto his back. The idea of Anderson sweating, exerting, *fucking* into C.J. brought goose bumps of suppressed orgasm to C.J.'s skin.

"I love it. You just keep doing that, man, because I'm going to—"

"Not yet!" Anderson pleaded.

"You can keep going... please, Anderson!"

"Not yet!"

"Please... oh, God, Anderson...."

"Just... fucking... wait... *now!*"

"*Auuuuuughhhhhhhh!*" C.J. was pretty sure he blacked out for a moment—and he was *really* sure he missed the come-rag. His entire body flashed hot and cold, and his eyes felt like they were going to pop out of his skull. His body shuddered, convulsed around Anderson's cock, and expelled it in a rush of seed while C.J.'s spend spat in sticky spurts over his stomach, thighs, and hand.

It didn't matter. The mess didn't matter. Anderson collapsed against his back, and C.J. snuggled backward willingly into his arms. Together, the two of them pitched sideways, facing the back of the couch, and just sat for a few moments, catching their breath.

"You okay?" Anderson asked, and C.J. tilted his head. Anderson met him halfway, propping himself up on an elbow so they could meet eyes.

"I'm better off than my couch," he muttered dryly, and Anderson smacked his hand to his forehead.

"I'm so sorry...."

“God, don’t be. The couch I can clean. What we just did there? I couldn’t recreate that with a butt plug and a cock-pump for any amount of money!”

“Or a holodeck,” Anderson said soberly, and C.J.’s exuberance quieted to absolute contentment.

“Or a holodeck.”

“My seed is in your body,” Anderson said quietly, like he was savoring the words. “You have no idea how damned sexy that is.”

C.J. clenched his bottom, felt the hot mass of it sliding down his crease, over his balls, down his thighs. “I do,” he said softly. It was solid and real—it was animal and base and tender and sublime all at once. Of course C.J. knew.

“So, I’ve got one question,” Anderson said, kissing C.J.’s shoulder, and C.J. smiled a little, feeling loopy.

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got a month of leave. What do we do now?”

Part 7: Anderson

Chapter 20 Dawn

THE question should have been, “What are we *not* going to do?”

There were limitations, of course. Anderson had swimming—now because he liked it—and therapy *every day* without cessation. He was the first to admit that it was necessary.

“Jensen and Molly help me keep track of what’s real and what’s not, and they’re good at figuring out the difference when I don’t feel like I’m doing a very good job.”

“They’re the best,” C.J. had conceded as they’d eaten dinner that first night. “They’ll take care of you.” They had showered first, and then made love again, and *then* finally gotten around to dinner.

“They’re not taking care of me because they’re the best,” Anderson said dryly. “They’re taking care of me because they love you.”

C.J. flushed. “Well, uhm, yeah. There’s that.”

“You and Jensen...?” Anderson inquired delicately, wanting the matter out of the way.

“Were terribly in love during university,” C.J. confessed without flinching. “But he’s way too brilliant for me, and I’m way too flaky for him, and so I broke it off before we could hate each other. He didn’t talk to me for two years, and then I ended up on the station, and we just kept meeting up planetside. It didn’t matter who we were with, we always ended up at the same place for dinner or a video or to swim or whatever, and, well, you’ve seen him.”

Anderson could concede that yes, given the chance to dance with Dr. Jensen Cherry, it would be a stupid man—or woman—who turned him down.

“And Molly?” Anderson had to ask.

C.J. had shrugged, grinned, and blushed. “Well, I’m bi, so’s she, and she and Jensen... hell, Anderson, their bed is—was—famous. Getting invited to their house was like getting invited to an all-you-can-eat sex buffet. Can’t deny I didn’t get stuffed on occasion.”

“Or stuffed yourself,” Anderson smirked. C.J. had topped the second (or third?) time that afternoon, and yes, it had been awesome.

“That too.”

“So, it *was* famous?”

C.J. shrugged, reaching for another helping of tubers and mammal-bird eggs. “They’re exclusive now. They sort of... let’s just say that for once I got to be a good example. They don’t want anybody else in the middle of them. It’s about time.”

And that had been that.

But after their workout—C.J. would come swimming with Anderson and then sit in the shade with a book during Anderson’s therapy session—the sky was the limit.

C.J. took him to every video theatre within an hour’s travel, and every restaurant too. They spent three days in a row at the nearest amusement park, and Anderson got to scream for real at the stomach-dropping happy fear of the roller coaster or the water ride, and he got to see a haunted house for the first time ever. (“That mirror thing was too close to the inside of my own head for comfort,” he’d confessed with a shudder, and they’d both agreed to stay the hell away from that attraction.) They’d played in the anti-gravity chamber and the skid room, where the floors were slippery against the poly-skids on their feet and all of the obstacles were softly padded, and Anderson had gone on the whirly rides, the kind that pressed you back against a wall with centrifugal force, until he’d nearly thrown up.

But that hadn’t been the best part.

The best part had been C.J.’s hard-wrung permission from Jensen and Molly to take Anderson on an overnight trip to the beach.

The beach itself was not far away—an hour, by a windy road with the hovercraft, to a little stand of cabins that stood with their front doors in the woods and their back doors on the sand.

That had been the best part.

When they'd arrived, C.J. had opened that back door, and Anderson looked out onto... the world. A vast beach, with sand dunes at its back, covered in pungent, yellow-and-purple flowered plants with leaves so green they were almost turquoise. The sand itself was a blinding white, and the ocean... damn. Wow. Holy hells.

It started out clear, cerulean blue, but as the horizon retreated, it darkened to a true blue-green-turquoise. The kelp stands as it grew deeper were fuchsia in color, and the peerless blue of the horizon—the sight literally stopped Anderson's breath in his chest.

All those years he'd been afraid to look beyond the confines of his imaginary walls because reality was so much smaller... and here was reality, aching beautiful and so, so bright, and it stretched beyond his fingertips, his for the taking.

He'd taken five steps out of the cabin, sat down abruptly on the sand, and simply wept, soundlessly, at the sight of it, while C.J. sat behind him, arms around his shoulders, and held him until he was done.

They'd stayed there for an hour, quiet in the moment, until the sun started to fall behind the horizon. In front of them, the sky blazed red and orange, and the water flooded with fire. Above them, the night was darkest purple, and the stars were so clear and white they could draw blood. Two of the moons waxed fat and gold, one full and one at three quarters, both of them beautiful.

Anderson had caught his breath and simply watched, and when the last fractals of sunlight had finally dispersed across the dark water, he'd collapsed in C.J.'s arms and breathed for what felt like the first time in years.

C.J. nuzzled his ear and spoken. "Hungry?"

"For sex or food?"

"Food first. Then sex. Then sleep."

"I like a man with his priorities straight."

Their lovemaking that night had been exquisite and tender, a kiss that never ended. They had simply taken each other in hand and stroked as they kissed lips, cheeks, chins, and finally succumbed, mouth to mouth, bodies heaving and straining, foreskins sliding furiously over the crowns of their cocks as they came on each other, scalding and sticky in the dark.

Two days later, C.J. had boarded the shuttle back to the space station and left.

This time Anderson had cried, and dented one of C.J.'s cabinets with his foot, and broken a chair. He'd confessed to C.J. rather shamefacedly over the video that night, and C.J. had grimaced.

"I'll start leaving shit for you to throw at the wall or something, baby. Carpentry's expensive!"

"You're not mad?"

C.J.'s smile across the monitor had been partly forgiving, partly bitter. "It's a hell of a lot better than the send-off you gave me last time," he said quietly, and abruptly, Anderson hadn't felt so bad for breaking things. C.J. was right. It was a hell of a lot better than helpless desperation.

The next three months had flown by.

Since C.J.'s stay had gone so well, Jensen let Anderson stay in C.J.'s bungalow. C.J. had given him the guest bedroom, and while it was true he put a desk in there and gradually found prints for the walls—including a shifting picture frame with pictures from C.J.'s first leave—and decorated it with stuff he liked, the truth was that Anderson slept in C.J.'s bed every night, dreaming about C.J.'s return.

Anderson's therapy sessions had become shorter and less frequent. While he still swam every day (because he had come to love it by now), he only saw Jensen or Molly every other day, and that was about the time he started wondering what to do with himself.

That was the day C.J.'s dad came to him with a proposition.

Anderson had been proud that he could greet Christopher James Poulson with fruit juice and fresh baked bread, a hobby he'd developed after ten years of synth food. They'd sat on chairs at a table in C.J.'s small backyard, which was mostly lawn with some flowering shrubs around for shade, and Chris, as he asked to be called, had talked of inconsequential things—the weather, what parts of the planet Anderson had seen, when he wanted a tour of the eastern quadrant of the northern hemisphere, and so on.

Then Chris had gotten to the point.

Anderson had sat for a few moments, a little stunned, and very interested, and very much afraid, after Chris had very sweetly offered to see himself out and give Anderson a chance to mull it over.

Anderson had sat until the fruit juice had grown warm and the late fall sunshine had grown a little bit uncomfortable before cleaning off the table and

going inside to C.J.'s bright, airy home away from the station. He'd washed up in a daze and then gone into "his" room and looked around. On the end table by the bed he never slept in, he'd set the school tablet that C.J. had so carefully preserved from the shuttle, the one with his family on it that he hardly recalled was his.

The one that he had only looked at when the demands of therapy required it.

That afternoon he sat down on the bed and looked at every picture and re-read every letter. Of course he cried through it—again. Of course it was painful, aching like the world was ending in his chest for every goddamned minute—again. When C.J. called that evening, he was still a mess—a weeping, slobbering, snotty mess—but when he told C.J. what he'd been doing and why, C.J. had smiled, that cocky, carefree C.J. smile that had let Anderson know it was all going to be okay in the first place, and Anderson wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"Of course you've got to, baby. Of course. It's perfect. You'll do a wonderful job. I have no doubt."

"But...." Anderson grimaced. He had jobs—more than one offer—up at the station, with the assurance that all he had to do was choose his venue and take his time. He'd made friends there, and his work on the holodeck had impressed *everybody*. He'd told C.J. during his visit that what he wanted was to be with *C.J.*—to work the same schedule, to come home and play together during leave and live together on the station and... to just *be* together, because Anderson, of all people, knew that there might not ever be enough time in the world for that to happen.

C.J. finished the sentence for him. "But you wouldn't be able to come up with me after my next leave."

"No." Anderson bit his lips and willed C.J. to understand—and because he was C.J., he did.

"This'll be good," he said with a decided nod to his head. "I mean, it'll suck, but it'll be good."

"Good?" Anderson asked with a small smile.

"You'll get to work with people. Meet people." C.J. blushed and looked haunted and frightened and sad. "People who aren't me."

"Aw, hell, not that shit again!" Anderson smacked his desk in exasperation.

“It’s a real consideration.”

“Not for me!”

Hell. Why couldn’t they ever hash these things out when C.J. was downplanet and Anderson could *touch* C.J. and reassure him that Anderson was totally and completely sincere? “C.J., you know I read my family’s letters, right?”

“Right.”

“My sister had a boyfriend, and I’m damned sure that if the universe hadn’t dropped a pile of rocks on that damned pile of rock, they would have been married and happy.”

“Well, your sister had a mining colony to choose from!” C.J. snapped.

“And I had a space station and... and... and a mental institution!”

They both stopped there and met each other’s eyes and giggled.

“Not to mention my own head!” Anderson finished with dignity, and that made C.J. out and out guffaw.

“Okay, okay, I’ll believe you. I have no choice. But here’s the deal. You stay down there and you take that money you hate so much and build that amazing idea my father came up with. And if you meet any people, any... you know... interesting people, while I’m off-planet, no hard feelings, okay?”

Anderson had scowled, and for a moment Alpha surfaced so forcefully that Anderson had no choice but to let him. “If you meet anybody interesting up there, you’d better tell them to keep their hands the hell off your body,” he growled. “That’s mine!”

C.J.’s laughter turned shy and pleased. “That’s a deal,” he mumbled.

“Good.”

The conversation had ended, and Anderson had talked to Jensen and Molly and worked out a flexible therapy schedule the next morning.

Then he’d called C.J.’s father, who seemed to love him already, and the work began.

Anderson put things in motion, hired people, dealt with financiers and bankers (whom he didn’t understand at all), and basically was *the boss* for the memorial foundation that would commemorate his home, his family, the world he’d known as a child.

He had some trouble with it at first.

For starters—names. Anyone named Katherine, Catherine, Kate, Kit, or Katy, Robert, Lisa or Risa, Alex, Leonard, Peter, Henry, or Aaron was automatically suspect. It was the silliest, simplest goddamned idea, but he and Molly and Jensen had spent hours looking at work profiles and folders of job applicants to try to decide if the people in the folders were qualified, or if Anderson just had an automatic bias because he missed the people on the holodeck now that he'd (mostly) chased them out of his head.

The schedule was difficult. Anderson had started medication and still had therapy, and keeping to his routine was vital. He'd missed his time to swim after a prolonged phone call once and had spent the rest of the day locked in his old room at the center, arguing with Kate over whether or not the phone call had been necessary.

That was a setback, and not the only one, but fortunately there was medication, and it was a godsend. Anderson was even more grateful when Jensen told him that when medication for mental health problems had been in its infancy, very often the cure had been almost as bad as the condition.

"It used to stifle about everything," Jensen said, taking Anderson's vitals. "Creativity, brain function, libido—"

"Libido!" Anderson—who had newly discovered the joys of his sex drive—had been horrified. "I'd rather die!"

Jensen hadn't laughed. In fact, his face had been grim and deadly serious. "For people on twentieth and twenty-first century Earth, it came down to that."

Anderson had subsided then and adhered to his medication regimen with gratitude and fervor after that, and the medication had helped him deal with the schedule disruptions and the constant barrage of people outside his usual social circle. In fact, the little project that he and C.J.'s dad had cooked up together seemed to be coming along just fine.

Well enough that Chris Poulson helped Anderson shelve most of his work for the month of C.J.'s leave.

"You mean I'm not going to meet any of your new friends?" C.J. complained when Anderson had come to get him at the shuttle port.

Anderson shook his head. "Nope. I'm afraid everybody has a job to do, a month to do it, and they're getting back to me the day after you leave."

C.J. slanted a look at him then. "You know, uhm, if I didn't know better, I'd think you made them up."

Anderson laughed long and hard at that one, threatening to pull their personnel files and have C.J.'s father over for dinner just to prove that his new friends were *not* all in his head.

They *had* invited C.J.'s parents over for dinner, but not before C.J. had laughingly, and thoroughly, demonstrated how very, very real everything Anderson believed in was true.

They spent the entire month together, including three days on the beach and an overnight trip to some caves on the Topaz continent in the southern hemisphere that C.J. had never seen either. Anderson had loved that trip. C.J., who had such an adolescent, little-kid look at the world, had been doubly precious when he'd been awestruck by the glittering caverns, miles deep beneath the surface of the planet, sprouting precious gems like a tree would sprout leaves.

"I see why they named the planet after a jewelry store now," Anderson said fervently, and C.J. had turned to him and kissed him in the glittering darkness.

"What was that for?"

"Being as much of a dork as I am."

Anderson wondered how C.J. could possibly think that another person could appeal to him, could live in his heart the way C.J. did. There *was* no other lover who could vie for even the memory of C.J.—not even in the flesh.

One man tried, though.

Anderson had managed, against his better judgment, to hire a guy named Leonard as part of his marketing team to get the word out for the grand opening of the project's culmination.

Leonard was quiet, with a dry sense of humor and a rather cynical way of looking at the world—and a secret desire to be pushed around that Anderson had sensed from a mile away.

Anderson worked him—and worked him hard—in his job as the head of PR for the memorial foundation, and they spent a couple of late nights together, sometimes coordinating with the graphic artist on the team and sometimes not.

It was on one of those nights when they were alone that Len had kissed him.

Anderson had been surprised, of course—and missing C.J., and human contact in general. In about two seconds, he'd had Len pushed against the wall, panting, begging, one leg wrapped around Anderson's slim body, his erection

grinding shamelessly into Anderson's groin.

"Wow," Len moaned. "What else you got for me?"

And for a moment, Anderson had a vision of Len, on his hands and knees, bound and begging, and he almost came from the thought.

Then he closed his eyes and tasted, and took a deep breath, and stepped back.

Len was real. He tasted real. His erection had felt real against Anderson's stomach. But he wasn't C.J., and it wasn't fair to treat him like a holo-dummy, something to just work out his sexual needs on, when he wasn't the man Anderson wanted in his arms.

"I'm sorry, Len," Anderson apologized—and it was sincere. "I think... I think you're great. And I think we could probably have a really good time."

Len thunked his head back against the doorframe. "But...?"

"But the love of my life is stationside, and he might not even have a problem with this, but I would. It's not fair to you. I can't use you like that."

Len gave a faint, dry laugh as he tried to right his pants and his clothes. "Use me! Use me!" he joked, and Anderson couldn't even smile.

"Never again," he said soberly, and Len caught the idea that this wasn't an option.

"Okay," he said. "Nothing personal. I get it. I... I knew you were attached, you know. You must mention C.J. twice an hour."

"So you made a move because?" Anderson was a little pissed, actually, but Len just shrugged.

"Because, kid, you'd be *so* worth it."

Anderson shook his head and said, "That's our cue for you to go home for the evening, okay?"

And it was. Len didn't make another move—and Anderson wasn't really tempted again.

But the work—the frantic work, since Anderson had given an almost impossible deadline—was worth it.

By the time C.J. came home for his leave, everything was in place.

THE day after C.J. arrived home from leave was spectacular. It was early summer, and the sky was so blue it seemed to fracture the heart. The air was fragrant—Anderson had learned that the Emerald Continent was known for its flowers, and he'd even planted some in C.J.'s backyard—and there was a slight breeze to keep things from being too uncomfortable.

Big, puffy clouds scudded across the sky, and the clearing of land that Anderson had purchased and developed was lovely and peaceful and sweet.

Or it would have been peaceful if it hadn't been for the two hundred or so people gathered on a plas-crete circle at the foot of a makeshift stage.

Anderson stood on the stage, a microphone clipped to the lapel of his rather fashionable suit—one piece, with large collars, and a tie, which he'd never seen before in his life until Jensen had taken him shopping. Behind him was a most unusual sculpture.

It was simple—it was a family.

Anderson had given the artist the picture, the one from his tablet, of his family gathered together at a time of celebration, and asked her to recreate it in bronze, and she had.

He'd thought a lot about the sculpture, and he'd gone back and forth with C.J. about it. An exploding planetoid? A shuttle? What did he want to stand in front of the Cancer Nebula Memorial Library and represent all of the things that he personally and the universe in general had lost that day?

In the end, he told C.J. that he was too self-centered at the moment to think about what the world had lost. He wanted what he had lost to be what people saw.

C.J. told him that it was a good idea. Once they saw what one person had lost, the loss became personal. It was perfect.

So Anderson stood in front of the family he'd lost and the boy he hadn't been in nearly twelve years and waited to address a crowd of people who were most definitely real. In the background, one of the mining colony's singers was breaking his heart with a voice so plaintive and yearning that it seemed to shadow the sun.

The song ended, and Anderson began speaking.

"Hello," he began, and was surprised as hell when everyone stopped talking and listened to him. He looked out at the crowd and saw C.J. smiling at him, wearing a suit of his own as he stood by his family. He looked... God. He

looked handsome and proud and joyful and everything Anderson might have dreamed about when he was a boy and had first dreamed about kissing a boy who brought him tablet stylus covers just because.

Anderson smiled back and then began speaking again. “I’m so glad you all could come,” he said, smiling at them with what C.J. called his sunlight smile. “My name is Anderson Rawn—and no, nobody calls me Andy. My parents were James and Caitlin Rawn, and my family lived on the Cancer Nebula mining colony, which had 2,128 residents at the last census.

“Two thousand, one hundred and twenty-seven of those residents were killed nearly thirteen years ago, including my parents and my sisters, the oldest of whom threw me aboard a ship and ensured my survival.” Anderson had since seen the recording that C.J. and Cassie had seen, and he’d spent a good week cursing Melody’s name. He’d spent the next month tearing up if he even heard it. Oh, God, Mel—but she’d known he loved her. Just like he knew that she loved him, unequivocally, with the same fierce protectiveness that Cassie loved C.J. That was the way of things. Even the best of love had to hurt sometimes.

“I spent the next eleven years on a shuttle, talking to myself,” he said now at the memorial that Melody would probably have yawned through. He waited for a moment and was gratified when the crowd gave an appreciative little laugh. “And one of the most pressing matters aboard the shuttle was the preservation of the things you will find in this library.”

He paused then and looked at C.J. one more time. “My soon-to-be husband, C.J., says that if I saved one song that makes it across the quadrant, I’ve successfully saved the memory of my entire people. I saved more than that, and it’s beautiful. The Cancer Nebula mining colony had been in place for over two hundred years. It was one of the first places populated in this galaxy, and between farming on the smaller asteroids and developing its own atmosphere, it was one of the prototypes that every other mining colony in Trading Federation space uses for its other colonies, and as a people, we had developed a small but singular culture, and music....” He smiled and remembered his family singing after dinner, singing during their chores, the music that had permeated his dreams in the shuttle.

“Music was our language. It was our hallmark, and it’s one of the things that we’ve preserved here, for you.”

He spoke some more. He talked about his family, his gentle mother, his shy, kind father, and his irrepressible little sisters. He talked about Melody, and the sacrifice she had made to make sure that one person—her little brother—

survived to tell their story, to make sure the colony survived, even beyond the explosions that wiped it out of existence.

“I didn’t know what to make for the memorial,” Anderson finished. “But C.J. said to make it personal. I know that there are thousands of smaller colonies scattered out between here and the Cancer Nebula, and I know that there are fatalities every year that will simply be lost in the void of space. But all of those people, I think the one thing they had in common was people to care about them, and that’s why I put my family here as a memorial. This is to commemorate loss in the vastness of space. I know it’s hard to believe, but every mortal soul is missed.”

He finished speaking, and there was a silence, and then the crowd erupted into tearful applause. Anderson beamed out at them, dry-eyed, and then looked out to C.J., who was not so dry-eyed.

Okay, he thought as the grief for his family finally settled into his heart like a comfortable blanket. *Okay*. The world knew what he had lost. It was no longer a terrible wound festering in his own heart. *Now* he could move on.

THAT night after the reception, he and C.J. lay with the covers shoved down to the foot of the bed and all of the windows open to let in a cooling breeze as they recovered from their lovemaking. C.J.’s dark skin was still paler than the night and his dark blue coverlet, and his light green eyes picked up the light of the three yellow moons as they slivered in through the windows. He looked... amazing, beautiful, and other-worldly. His high-cheekboned apple-cheeks gave him the absolutely wicked air of a child who had done something unforgivably rotten.

The thought made Anderson grin smugly. Well... it had been *bad*, but it certainly hadn’t been *rotten*. C.J.’s body was marked, inside, outside, every side, with Anderson’s blatant possession, and Anderson was proud of it.

Of course, Anderson’s body was marked in a similar way, right down to a love bite at his collarbone that proclaimed to any other Lens out there that Anderson was officially claimed.

“So,” C.J. said now, “you said something about getting married?”

Anderson laughed. “You mean when I was up in front of two hundred people and you couldn’t argue with me?”

C.J.'s smile was perfectly content. "I wouldn't have argued, oh mighty man-leader, but I'm thinking you've got something in mind."

"Yeah," Anderson told him. "I figured a small ceremony before we go up to the station at the end of leave."

C.J. rolled over onto his stomach and raised his eyebrows. "We? As in both of us?"

Anderson nodded and placed random kisses on C.J.'s shoulder, his ear, his cheek. "Yeah—now that the foundation's been established, your dad can run it and ask me questions by monitor, and you and me, we can... you know. Work. Live. Have a life. A real one, together."

For a moment, C.J. looked concerned. "What about therapy? Jensen, Molly—do they know about this?"

Anderson nodded soberly. Dealing with the change in routine was going to be a challenge—but Jensen thought he was up to it. "I've been cleared for the vid screen. For three months, as long as they get me in the morning, my ass is yours noon and night."

C.J.'s smile was dazzlingly white, even in the light of the two yellow moons. "Aw, sweetie, that's almost a romantic proposal or something. Which job are you taking?"

Anderson's grin was one hundred percent little kid, and he knew it. Hell, he figured he was due. "The one at the hub."

C.J. laughed, his naked body balling up as he hugged a pillow to his stomach and chortled until his stomach was probably sore. "Perfect," he gasped. "Absolutely perfect. You're amazing. I can't wait."

Anderson's smile relaxed, grew serious, and he studied C.J. with a suddenly tight throat. "Good," he said. "Because I waited long enough for you."

C.J. rolled his eyes. "You waited to land, baby. I was just a perk."

Anderson shook his head, absolutely positive that he was right in this and C.J. was wrong. "No. If I had landed with anyone else, I'd still be lost in the space of my head. C.J., you're the only person on the planet who could find me when I didn't even know I was missing."

C.J. grabbed the blanket and pulled it over his shoulders. "You overestimate me, Anderson, but that's okay. You keep doing that, and I'll keep living up to it. We'll be fine."

"Don't look so worried!" Anderson chided, and C.J. bundled closer into

the blanket. Anderson didn't like that at all. He tugged on the blanket and insinuated himself over C.J.'s slightly larger body. *Anderson* wanted to be the blanket. It was the least he could do.

"I don't ever want to let you down," C.J. whispered.

"Impossible," Anderson whispered back. "Now kiss me so you can get it up and nail me into the bed, and then tomorrow, we can figure out how to get married on your planet so no one else feels like they can just move in on your turf."

C.J. grinned then, and the moment lightened. "Now *that's* something I can do!"

THE month passed quickly, and the ceremony too. It was small—a civil ceremony, since most religious practices on Hermes-Eight were personal ones celebrated among families and not in the public venues anyway. The union was notarized and recorded in a civil court and then celebrated in C.J.'s backyard with C.J.'s parents, Jensen and Molly, Cassie and Marshall, and a few other close friends, including Julio, who had come planetside especially to attend.

The next day they were giddy, and a little bit hungover, and they barely made the shuttle as it was preparing to launch.

Julio laughed at them as he held the door so the flight attendant could get to his other duties. "You two, geez, whose idea was it, anyway, to get married and then fly straight to work."

"His!" C.J. laughed. "But I agreed, so I can't complain!"

"I just wanted a ring on his finger before he got back to the station," Anderson said grumpily. He'd heard enough stories from Jensen in the past month to want to make damned sure that C.J. was claimed in front of every species that ventured into Anderson's territory. He knew it made him more Alpha than he was used to, but at this point he didn't care. C.J. was his. There was no other option.

"Well, settle in, you two, we've got twelve hours during which you *can't* get naked. I know it's going to be a hardship, so brace yourselves."

From behind Julio, Cassidy giggled, the sound muffled against her husband's chest. They were returning, too, and Anderson was looking forward to having family around him as he settled into his new life.

C.J. flipped his family off and settled into the window seat, ignoring Anderson's, "Hey!" in protest.

"You can look over my shoulder," C.J. said, then grinned. "You can sit closer that way."

Anderson raised his eyebrows and they settled in, both of them tired and clearly planning to nap once the shuttle cleared Hermes-Eight-Prime.

"Hey," said Julio as he settled in himself. "I forgot to ask you two. Where's Anderson working stationside? You never said!"

"Now that's not right!" C.J. admonished, and Anderson grimaced.

"Jeez, Anderson," Cassidy chided. "Isn't Julio the reason you got the job?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. It's true. I should have thanked you already!" Social niceties—they were never going to come easy.

"You're welcome. So what are you doing?" Julio asked avidly, and Anderson grinned. He couldn't help it. It was every boy's dream job, and damned if he hadn't earned it.

"One of the hub's entertainment companies hired me. I'm going to design a holo-amusement park for the hub."

Julio laughed from the stomach, honestly amused. "*That* is far too much fun for you, my man. We're going to have to pull you up to the station for some real work."

Anderson shook his head. "Nope, I'm not gonna let ya!"

C.J. grinned over his shoulder. "Don't do that, Jules. See, the thing is, we spent my entire leave on 'research trips', and we get cut-line passes and everything."

"Aww!" Julio groaned, clearly disgusted by that much fun being had by two grown men. "You two, go away. I'm not speaking to you. Next time, you'd better fucking invite *me*!"

They laughed, giddy with expectation, when the intercom came on and they fastened their gravity belts to get ready for take-off.

"You nervous?" C.J. asked, and Anderson realized abruptly that this was the first time he'd taken off in a shuttle since his sister had thrown him on one nearly thirteen years ago in order to save his life.

He thought about it, then shook his head. "No," he said somberly. "Not even a little."

“No?”

“No.” He leaned over and gave C.J. a kiss on the cheek. “This time, I know exactly where I’m going and who I want with me. It’s not a dream, baby. You’re all real.”

C.J. smiled softly. “Believe it.”

Anderson did. The shuttle engine whined, and the small craft started to rattle as it maneuvered into place to take off. Anderson held C.J.’s hand and looked out the window—he could hardly wait for the wheels to leave the ground.

Stationside, planetside—it didn’t matter where they were. As long as C.J. was with him, he knew he’d landed home.

AMY LANE is a mother of four and a compulsive knitter who writes because she can't silence the voices in her head. She adores cats, knitting socks, and hawt menz, and she dislikes moths, cat boxes, and knuckle-headed macspazzmatrons. She is rarely found cooking, cleaning, or doing domestic chores, but she has been known to knit up an emergency hat/blanket/pair of socks for any occasion whatsoever or sometimes for no reason at all. She writes in the shower, while commuting, while taxiing children to soccer/dance/karate/oh my! and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested, crumbling house in a shoddy suburb and counts on her beloved Mate, Mack, to keep her tethered to reality—which he does while keeping her cell phone charged as a bonus. She's been married for twenty-plus years and still believes in Twu Wuv, with a capital Twu and a capital Wuv, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

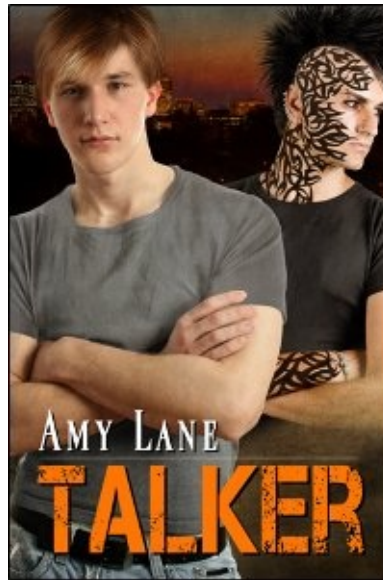
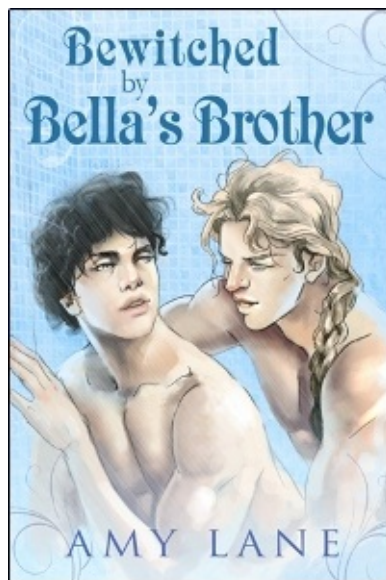
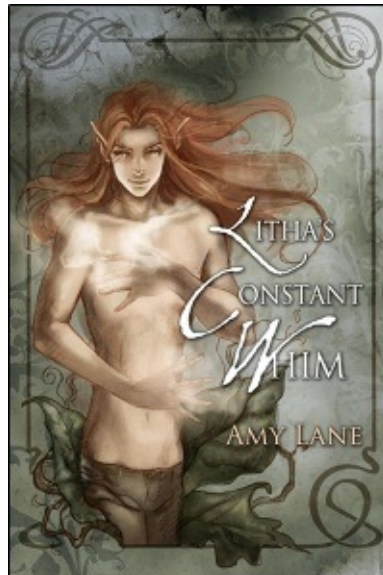
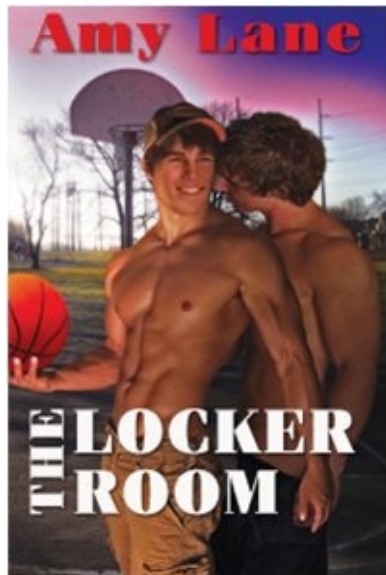
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